Australian National University

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
Research School of Humanities and the Arts

SCHOOL OF ART

VISUAL ARTS GRADUATE PROGRAM
Master of Philosophy

CHARLOTTE SUSAN BANKS

I Sing the Body Electric:

Drawing and Painting Active Bodies in an Active Workplace

THESIS PRESENTED IN PART FULFILMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

AUGUST / 2017

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY.

I, Susan Banks, hereby declare that the thesis presented here is the outcome of the research project I have undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, quotations or paraphrases attributable to other authors.

Signed:…… Date: …….. ….

Acknowledgements

I thank my supervisors, Raquel Ormella and Gordon Bull for their support throughout the project. I was very lucky to have Raquel's practical help and critical feedback in the studio and both Gordon and Raquel's assistance in all the stages of writing. Thank you, too, to my fellow students in the programme for their friendship and help, in particular, Susan Buret, Susan Chancellor, Elisa Crossing, Tiffany Cole, Claudia Chaseling and Phil Page. My friend Tracy O'Brien made a template for me, which was invaluable. Emma Beer and Fraser Argue gave me physical and technical help, thank you. My editors were crowd-sourced—Dorothy Jauncey, Susan Clarke and John Dearn and I am very grateful to them. Finally, I thank my family especially my children and grandchildren who believed that I could complete the task.

This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

CONTENTS.

I Sing the Body Electric: [1]

Drawing and Painting Active Bodies in an Active Workplace

Abstract

This project explores how drawing and painting based on extended observation can render vitality. Having embedded myself in my local automotive repair workshop, I made a large number of experimental paintings and drawings. I tested how various forms of figuration and abstraction varied in their ability to convey the vitality of the scene and the painter's presence.

The investigation led to a final body of paintings that had areas where figuration broke down, which allowed other elements such as gesture and colour to be freed from form, and to convey energy, rhythm, noise and rotation. This particular capacity of drawing and painting means that those practices still have a place to play in the depiction of everyday workplaces—currently largely the province of photography and documentary filmmaking.

[1] Walt Whitman, *Selections from Leaves of Grass* (New York: Avenel Books, 1961), 46.

List of Illustrations

All images and photographs not otherwise attributed are the author's own work.

List of Tables.

Introduction

My research asks how I might use the language of drawing and painting to render active participants in an active workplace and how the resulting work might imply the body of the artist. My preoccupation with vitality had led me in my previous practice to make works of gestural abstraction. For this project I wanted to include representation as well. Based on my reading, I thought that figurative renderings of people could engage the viewer in their action.

I chose my local automotive workshop to explore embedded observation, painting and drawing. When I considered where I would find whole body, two-handed movements I realised that the garage was an ideal place. The activity had the advantage that it consisted of repeated strenuous actions rehearsed and perfected over time—people carrying out real tasks. Other places I considered, such as the drawing studio or the gym, had the drawback of artificiality.

My question was “How can I use the language of painting and drawing, combined with embedded observation, to render the whole active scene, including the body of the artist?” Central to my process was testing how various forms of abstraction and representation varied in their ability to depict my experience of the garage.

I set out to make work that included my physical presence as the artist as well as rendering the scene. My gesture was what I used to convey my sensing presence bringing in aspects of the garage mediated through hearing, sight and proprioception. I was also keen to include my presence because I was there as an observer and the interaction between the mechanics and me was part of the topic. And finally there are figures

present in an automotive workshop who are constructing and operating on the representational content of the painting, mirroring what I do as a painter and possibly standing in for me.

Figure 1, Annibale Carracci, *The Butcher's Shop,* 1583

The painting and drawing of work represents a long tradition. Genre painting, the depiction of everyday scenes, including workplaces, has existed for as long as painting itself.[2] Annibale Carraci's *The Butcher's Shop* is an example from the Baroque era.[3] From the late nineteenth century throughout the twentieth century the depiction of work and workplaces became politicised; in later chapters I will discuss some of these polemical paintings by Gustave Courbet, Fernand Léger and Ekaterina Zernova. Painters depicted workers with a view to advancing both left wing and right wing causes. They did so by idealising the body of the worker and the dignity of labour in movements such as Soviet Socialist

[2] "Genre Painting", *Oxford Art Online,* http://www.oxfordartonline.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/subscriber/article/grove/art/T2086907?q=genre+painting&search (accessed 15 July 2017).
[3] "Annibale Carraci", *Oxford Art Online,* http://www.oxfordartonline.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/subscriber/article/img/grove/art/F014883?goto=Annibale+CArraci&_start=1&source=oao_gao&pos=1 (accessed 5 August 2017).

Realism, German National Socialism, South American Socialism and European Communism.

In recent years the depiction of work and workplaces, whilst still political, has become more naturalistic and largely the province of photography and documentary filmmaking. Photographers such as Sebastaio Salgado and Edward Burtinsky depict workers in their environment.[4] However paintings of workers in functioning local workplaces no longer appear to any extent in the contemporary sections of mainstream 'western' galleries. I looked for such work in Australian galleries; I searched major galleries in France, Holland and the UK on a field trip to Europe. I conducted literature searches in an attempt to locate contemporary drawings and paintings of a busy workplace, all with no success. I found sparsely peopled paintings that portrayed industrial decay or worker alienation, by artists such as Edward Hopper or Yvan Salomone, but they addressed ruin and unpeopled imagery resonating with the idea of the decline of the industrialised west and the alienation of its citizens. Other painters such as Neo Rauch and others in the Leipzig school painted workers in surrealist scenes. My work differs from all of theirs in that it conveys multiple aspects of the reality of a busy local workplace in action.

In testing my thesis, that drawing and painting combined with extended observation have a particular capacity to evoke embodied human activity in complex environments, I demonstrate that these practices still have much to contribute to the understanding and depiction of work in the twenty-first century. Everyday physical work still continues everywhere in the world and I argue that observing, drawing and painting a local manifestation of it links it to its history and future. My work, along with the work of relatively few other painters is situated in a gap that has appeared in the practice of painting.

---

[4] Sebastião Salgado, *Sebastião Salgado - Workers* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1993), 7-17.

Over the course of the project, which lasted for three and a half years, I made hundreds of paintings and drawings. The research can be divided into three broad phases. The first phase, illustrated by Appendix 1, was early experimentation resulting in strategies that I could use to depict the space. The second addressed the integration of human figures into the complex environment. The third section included gesture, which evoked the presence of the artist as a participant observer. The scale of the work increased as I progressed through the project but never became larger than 112.5 x 90 cm, a medium sized painting. This was to reflect the nature of the workplace. It was larger than domestic, but smaller than industrial.

Key concepts:

I will now outline briefly the key concepts in my project. These are vitality, embedded observation, spiral development and the figural, which is the combination of representation and abstraction.

Vitality

My previous practice had centred on painting everyday bodily activity and energy using rhythmical gesture to evoke not only the physiological source of bodily energy—heartbeats, breathing, but also their expression through large muscle movement. The reason I made such work and was keen to continue it is that I am drawn to vitality in others, Daniel Stern, the psychoanalyst, describes vitality as "the felt quality of being alive", and vitality is the first thing I notice about a person after their gender.[5] I see how their stance, their facial expression and their gesture change over time. Their vitality varies—they can be exuberant or they can be quiet and slow. Vitality can manifest itself as rhythmic or arrhythmic. It is a gestalt that defines a person and is what I enjoy about being with people. I discuss the subject further in Chapter One.

[5] Daniel N. Stern *Forms of Vitality; Exploring Dynamic Experience in the Arts, Psychotherapy, and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

I wanted to extend the depiction of vitality in the light of Ian McGilchrist's writing about brain functioning. He asserts that viewing an action, imagining the action, and performing it share observable effects in the brain, an idea that I expand in Chapter Two.[6] My previous work had consisted of gestural abstraction. I wanted to add the representation of moving bodies to the practice, so that viewing the action would intensify the viewer's experience of energy in the paintings.

Embedded observation

Figure 2, Wendy Sharpe, *On patrol, near Suai (Wendy Sharpe, Private Cameron Simpson and unidentified soldier),* 2000

Sociologist Bruno Latour describes "relativist research" as being where the embedded researcher learns the language of the subjects.[7] By learning language he means becoming familiar with their day-to-day routines, listening to how they speak in informal ways and observing how decisions are made. For example in contemporary photojournalism, photographers

[6] Ian McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 250.
[7] Bruno Latour, quoted by Barbara Czarniawska, "Book Review: Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory." *Organization Studies* 27, no. 10 (2006): 1553–557. doi:10.1177/0170840606071164.

might be embedded in military units and report events from that perspective. War artists such as Wendy Sharpe join a tour of duty, live with the military and make work as participant observers.[8] I believe that much of the power of these works comes from the heightened emotional arousal of both artists and subjects. In order to depict a different, local and everyday environment, I have joined a quieter, more contemplative tradition of embedded observation.

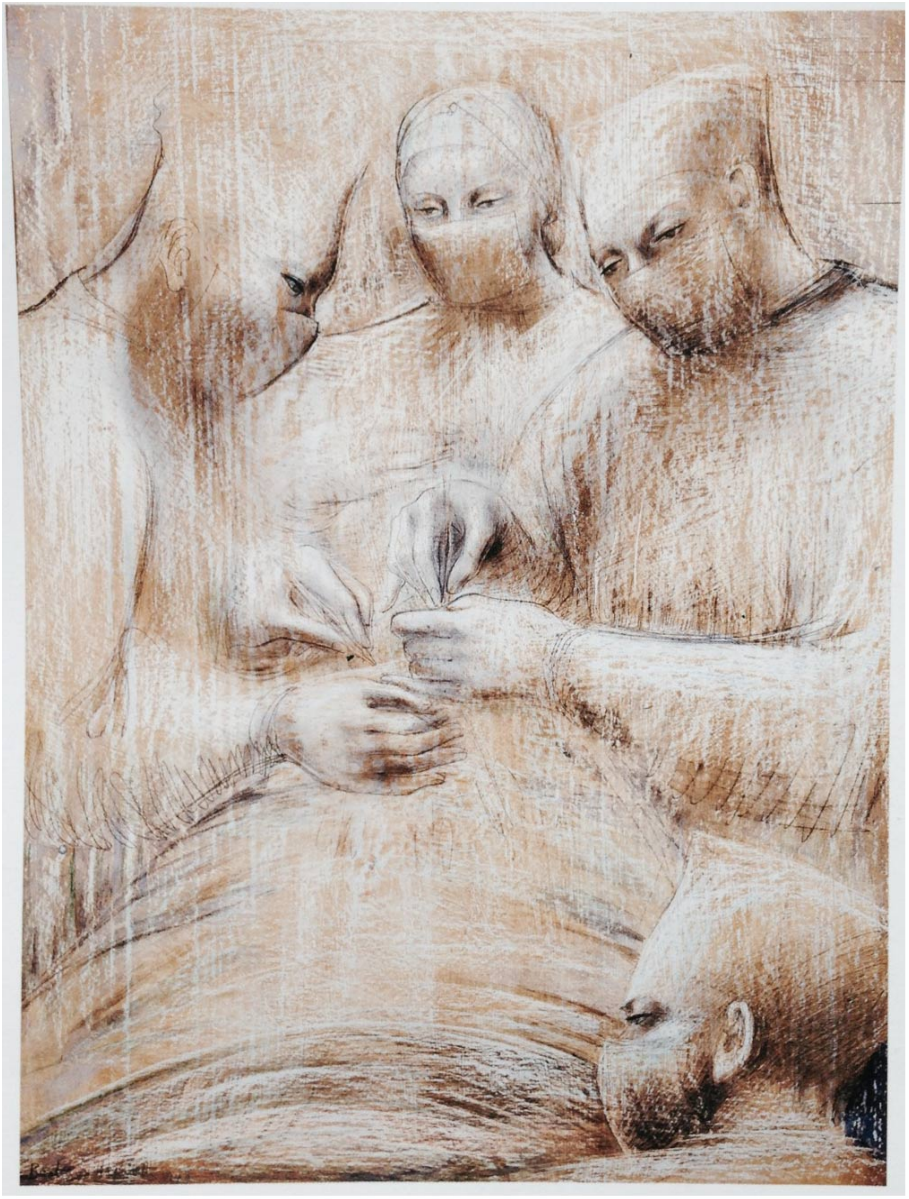

Figure 3, Barbara Hepworth, *Concentration of Hands I*, 1948.

[8] Catherine Speck, "Wendy Sharpe: Official War Artist in East Timor", *Artlink*, 33, no. 3, (Sep 2013): 66-67.

In 2014, I walked into a room in Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, UK, full of glowing light that appeared to be emanating from a series of small works somewhere between drawings and paintings. The colours were soft ochres and greens on a chalky white ground, and the subject was groups of people working in an operating theatre. Barbara Hepworth, the British abstract sculptor, made these drawings at the invitation of a surgeon after one of her children had undergone operations for osteomyelitis, a bone disease, which at that time required a long and gruelling treatment.[9]

Concentration of Hands I, (Figure 1), is a small work made by scratching back into a wash of ochre paint over a rough grainy gesso-like white material and then drawing further into the work. Four figures attend to a fifth who is unconscious and is implied at the centre. The anaesthetist, the guardian of the absent patient, has his back to us. The three figures facing us are looking at the patient and two of them are looking at their hands as they operate. The focus is on the four hands that are rendered tonally in detail, and the eye lines reinforce this focus.

In Hepworth's own words

> From the moment I entered the operating theatre I became completely absorbed by two things: first the extraordinary beauty of purpose and coordination between human beings all dedicated to the saving of a life, and the way that unity of idea and purpose dictated a perfection of concentration, movement and gesture; and secondly by the way this special grace (grace of mind and body) induced a spontaneous space composition.[10]

Hepworth "became completely absorbed", and one of the subjects of the painting is absorption in work. She says the composition was spontaneous—it almost appears to have made itself in response to the shared purpose and concentration. Studying this work and others in the

[9] Nathaniel Hepburn, *Barbara Hepworth, The Hospital Drawings* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), 17.
[10] Barbara Hepworth quoted by Chris Stephens, " From Constructivism to Reconsruction", *Barbara Hepworth Reconsidered,* ed. David Thistlewood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 140.

series spoke to my heart, my head, my aesthetic sense and my political consciousness. Combined with my desire to paint vitality it led me to the idea of observing and painting people at work, and as I have described led me to the service centre.

Figure 4, *Flying Orange Car,* 2014.

Having chosen the garage, I, too, felt an immediate strong response. The service centre is a fascinating and unfamiliar scene full of contrasts—light and shade, line and form, human and mechanical, degraded tertiary coloured areas and pristine sharp primary-coloured elements with a flow of energy around the space. I was overwhelmed by the noise, energy and complexity, by the unusual features such as ‘flying cars’, that is, cars lifted on hoists and viewed from below (Figure 4). Like Hepworth, I was moved by the cooperation, absorption and concentration of the team. The mechanics moved around a variety of tasks, they collaborated and worked

individually. They wore uniforms that suited the work, protective and easy to move in, gloves to work on the cars and Hi vis vests. They wrote on clipboards and entered data in the computer. I had to comply with the rules and constraints of the workplace.

I wore a Hi vis vest in the garage; Hepworth wore a hospital gown in the operating theatre. I had to be careful not to be run over whilst she had to observe some sterile procedures. As she did in the hospital, I did in the garage. I embedded myself for months turning into years with the aim of drawing, observing and becoming familiar with the routines and practices. I was unsure, at first, of my place in the workshop, how the mechanics would view me and the extent to which I would involve them in the work. As it turned out we had a friendly light- hearted relationship and there was a sense that while I was doing my work, they were doing theirs. They always seemed really pleased to see me when I arrived.

Central to my process was watching, drawing and later photographing at the workshop. As an embedded observer I approached all three in the spirit of “negative capability” The British poet, John Keats coined the term in describing the work of Shakespeare: “When a man is capable of being in doubts, mysteries and uncertainties without any irritable searching after fact and reason…”[11] Many writers have used the term since, amongst them Wilfred Bion, the psychoanalyst, who maintained that Keats had articulated the condition necessary for any creative act.[12] Holding oneself in this suspended receptive state seems to be crucial to carrying out practice-led research.

The early stages of my project were characterized by doubt and uncertainty, which I realize now, drove the development of the work.

---

[11]John Keats. *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats, Cambridge Edition*. (Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1899), (Amazon Kindle Ed). p. 277.

[12]Anna Dartington in W.R. Bion and T.S.Eliot, *Tavistock Gazette*, 1980. http://www.psychoanalysis.org.uk/paper1.htm Anna Dartington W.R. Bion and TS Eliot (accessed 24 July 2015). 7.

Drawing and observing in this state mediated a dialogue between the garage and the studio. Throughout my project, a visit to the garage always enlivened my work and provided me with a new idea and a way forward.

Spiral development

In her essay "Painting Now", Bridget Riley, the British abstract painter, says that "the true tradition (of painting) lies less in a succession of solutions than in recognizing that the problems of picture-making can never be solved as such. And it is just this that constitutes painting's continued vitality."[13] We look for the solutions again or look for them repeatedly in our research. Because my research was driven by doubt and uncertainty, my approach was spiral and it is an interesting coincidence that a spiral motif permeates my body of work (Figure 5). I engaged with complexity from the beginning, I moved from drawing to drawing and from painting to painting each informed by the one before. Then the path looped back on itself and I found that I was revisiting a previous problem with a period of months or years in between. There were seductive side roads that I sometimes went down, particularly as the patterns, the cars and the machines themselves were so visually interesting, but each time I returned to my central concern, which was portraying the energy of the total scene.

[13].Bridget Riley, *The Eye's Mind, Collected Writings 1965 – 2009,* ed. Robert Kudielka (London: Ridinghouse, 2009), 302.

Figure 5 *Air Pressure Hose I*, 2015, (detail).

Figural painting

Advance and retreat from representation have been central to my process. Elisabeth Grosz, in her book *Chaos, Territory, Art* describes figural painting, which lies midway between figurative art and abstraction. It employs the visceral force of figurative painting but limits it to areas of the painted field. The figural is the abandonment of figurative painting but it "retains the body, planes and colours which it extracts from the figurative."[14] All my painting is figural to some extent. Having areas of the painting where figuration breaks down allows other elements such as gesture and colour to play their part in conveying energy, rhythm, noise and rotation.

Themes

The themes of absorption, being a woman painting men and the political emerging from the everyday weave through this account.

[14] Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 88.

I argue that absorption in work, the mechanics' and mine, was part of the subject. Absorption in physical work means that the whole body and mind are attending to a problem. Although the action might be strenuous, absorption somewhat quietens it. I expand on this idea in Chapters Two and Three with reference to the construction of the figure from the ground.

The issue that I am a woman painting men gives rise to a complex web of interactions involving curiosity about "the other". I will argue, using the notion of the Hawthorne effect, that, throughout the project, the mechanics performed differently when I was there.[15] I argue this more fully in Chapter Three in relation to the "*Dancing Mechanics*" series.

I set out to paint the everyday and the local with as few preconceptions as possible. I contend, as does Henri Lefebvre, that the everyday evokes the political.[16] The everyday happenings at the garage, such as answering the phone, led to insights about Australian and global organization of labour that I describe in Chapter 3.

Exegesis Outline

In Chapter One I argue with reference to the observations, drawings and paintings I made in my first year that my observation and open-ended experimental approach led to ways of using abstraction and figuration to capture the qualities of the particular space of the garage and its inhabitants. My observation of rotation led to ways of painting that were central to the development of the project. I discuss dialogues between dichotomies, including drawing and painting, translucency and opacity, shiny and matte. I explain how I developed a dynamic palette. I contextualize this work with reference to paintings by Bridget Riley and Julie Mehretu and I refer to the writings of John Berger and Riley.

---

[15] Tim Hindle, *The Economist Guide to Management Ideas and Gurus.* http://www.economist.com/node/12510632 (accessed 13 March 2017). 1–4

[16] Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis, Space, Time and Everyday Life,* 1992, trans, Gerald Moore (London: Bloomsbury, 2004) Amazon Kindle ed., 15.

Chapter Two carries my argument into more complex work. The central dialogue between abstraction and figuration continued. The paintings increasingly integrated the figure into the environment. The absorption of the figure both into the scene and the materiality of the paint emerged as an important theme. I argue this with reference to Michael Fried and also discuss parallels that emerged between my work and that of Neo Rauch.

In Chapter Three I describe the direction my work is taking in preparation for my exhibition. Abstraction and representation have continued to complement each other and gesture has become more important. I discuss how, late in my project, I started to investigate the installation of the works in such a way that they activate the space. I argue that my being a woman painting men generated curiosity, interest, performance and energy in both the workers and me. I report on findings that emerged from observation and argue, along with Henri Lefebvre and Bruno Latour, that the everyday allows us to grasp the political.

Chapter One: Setting the Scene

Introduction

This chapter is about beginnings. It explains how, having plunged into the complexities of the automotive workshop, I began to make sense of the environment. Appendix 1, a collection of thumbnail images of drawings and paintings, shows how I produced a relatively large amount of disparate work at this stage. The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first I describe how I used drawing to understand what I was seeing. The long second section is based on the way a sense of rotation permeates the scene. In this section I discuss abstraction and representation, how I developed my palette and how I rotated the ground, working in four rectangular directions of the canvas to bring a sense of rotation into the painting. The last section argues how using contrasts and integrating them both described the scene and animated the paintings. I revisit all of these ideas in later chapters in keeping with my spiral approach. I refer to the writings of John Berger and Elisabeth Grosz, the paintings and writings of Bridget Riley and compare my work with that of artists Mike Parr and Julie Mehretu.

Drawing at the garage

In June 2014, after the management of Kmart Tyre and Auto Service gave me permission, I went to their Deakin Service Centre. I started to draw and to grapple with the difficulty of understanding and recording what I saw. At first I concentrated on the bodies in motion. However, it soon became apparent that their movements were in response to, and dependent on, their surroundings. I had to give the environment equal weight with the figures in order to render what was happening. What I needed to capture was the flow of energy around the scene. The surrounding architecture, machines and work processes dictated the movement. The actions of the mechanics in turn changed the surroundings, as cars, tyres and tools were moved (Figure 6). This environment also placed constraints on where my body could go and from what angles I could observe the scene.

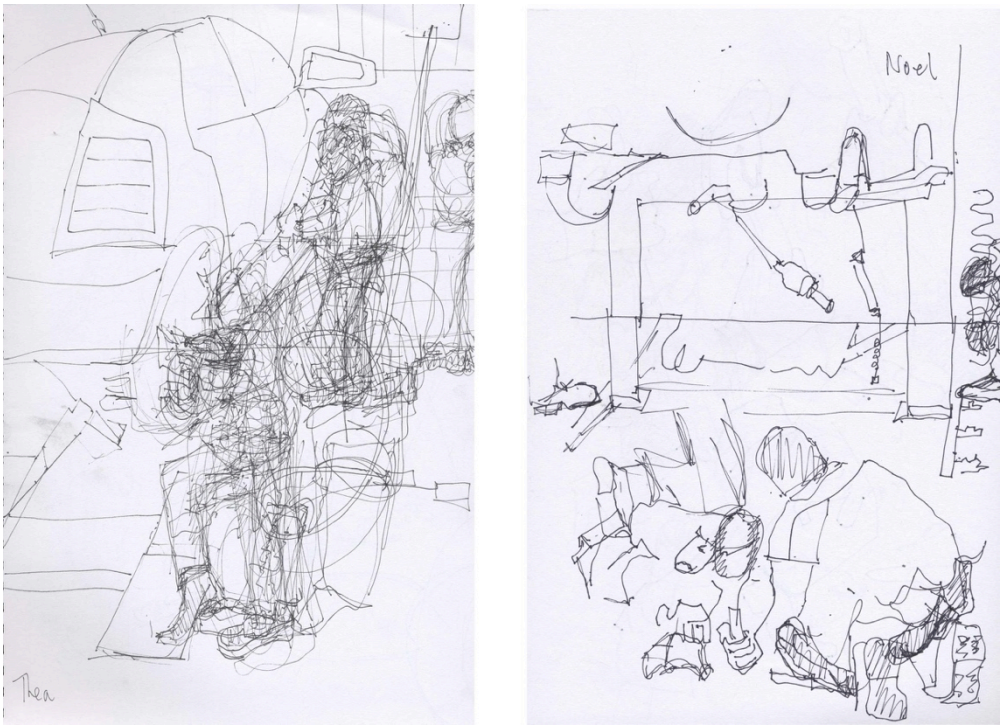

Figure 6, ***Changing tyres (Thea), and Deconstructed car (Noel)*****, 2014.**

Figure 7, ***Aaron writing, 2014 and Hi-vis (Sue)*****, 2014, digital photographs.**

My body, as I drew, mirrored those of the mechanics—they wrote on clipboards with ballpoint pens, I drew similarly in an A4 book (Figure 7). I

drew architectural details, cars, machines and figures and I made lines that followed movement real or imagined (Figures 6 and 8). Both they and I had to use our peripheral vision and to be alert at all times to the hazards of the workshop. I was trying to see what was there and slowly build up questions and ideas about how to reconstruct all this action in the studio as finished work.

John Berger has described this process of drawing as exploration in his essay *Life Drawing.* He writes “drawing is a process of discovery”.[17] As the artist makes and checks each mark, each confirmation or denial of its accuracy brings them closer to the object until finally they are inside it. Elsewhere he describes this process as optical emigration, by which the artist, following his or her own gaze, settles on a tree, a mountain [or a car hoist] being drawn.[18] Berger’s description is apt, as I was not trying to make finished work or even working drawings. I was using drawing to enter into the scene in a bodily way.

Rotation

Abstraction and representation

Figure 8, *Rotating the Wheels*, 2014.

[17] John Berger, *Berger on Drawing,* ed. Jim Savage (Cork: Occasional Press, 2005), 3.
[18] Ibid., 47

This bodily engagement was enacted in a variety of ways. I often made circular gestures as I drew (Figure 8). The work of the garage centres on rotation. The work carried out on cars in this workshop is mechanical servicing: wheel alignment and balancing, rotating the wheels to even out wear, oil changing, brake checks and repairs, checking the coolant system and repairing moving parts. By far the largest part of the work is removing and replacing wheels and moving them around. As a result when the mechanics are engaged with this work their bodies describe circular motions. Machines, wheels, tools all rotate.

Further contributing to the sense of rotation is the fact that for much of the time the men work above their heads on the underside of the car. Working in this unusual orientation or viewing someone doing it can, in my experience, be quite vertiginous. The sky becomes the ground and vice versa. We are not sure if we are standing on our feet or our hands. Feeling this contributes in another way to the sense of rotation.

At the time that I was drawing at the car workshop I was making paintings in my studio. *Rotation I* (Figure 9) was one of my responses to the feeling of rotation. I laid down a grey-green ground referencing the walls and ceiling of the space. In each of the directions of the canvas I painted three elements: marks referencing the heartbeats of people, a right-angled abstract shape, and an abstracted version of the air pressure hose. I varied the size of the marks to indicate depth. Towards the end I added the rafters to anchor a sense of “up and down” which contrasted with the rotation. The composition, with most of the activity towards the edges of the canvas, is centrifugal, adding to the sense of rotation.

Figure 9, *Rotation I*, 2014.

In *Rotation I*, but also in the other paintings in Appendix 1, it seemed to me that the combination of abstract elements, gesture and figuration led to a work which communicated more about my experience. I felt that they combined to give the viewer a possible understanding of time passing, human effort, the routines of car maintenance, and electrical energy powering the tools in different ways. This observation underpins my whole project, and my research work continues to include more or less representation.

A powerful example of this combination employed by another artist is this large woodblock print by Mike Parr (Figure 10). This immersive work consists of a large area of gestural abstraction on the left and a smaller,

roughly drawn figure of a face, possibly a torso, above a landscape-like horizon. It is possible to imagine the contents of the large abstract area emerging from the mouth of the figure. The figuration on the right hand side appears to invite us to interpret some of the abstraction figuratively. I see a foetus, an eye and a penis in amongst the marks, although I know they may not be intended. Parr considers all his works to be self-portraits and says that they are about his relationship with his father.[19] I can speculate that the print could be about his father talking to him. Whether or not this is true, the combination of abstraction and figuration conveys something disturbing and powerful that abstraction alone or figuration by itself could not.

Figure 10, Mike Parr, *Interjection of a Horse,* 2002.

Elizabeth Grosz in her book *Chaos, Territory, Art* says that art "is the way in which shreds of chaos can return in sensation".[20] Quoting Giles Deleuze, she describes three ways that painting in the twentieth century deals with sensation (what we perceive and feel) and chaos (the stuff of the universe). The first way is represented by Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich and involves codifying chaos to produce a kind of "spiritual geometry". [21] The

[19] Terence Maloon, "Provocative Invitation to Solve Parr's Riddles", *Sydney Morning Herald,* Saturday, 8 June, 1985, 48.
[20] Grosz, 77.
[21] Ibid., 88.

second is expressionism such as the work of Jackson Pollock where chaos *is* the work: “chaos is deployed to the maximum”. The work evokes the tactile and the haptic. For Deleuze there is a third way that lies between figurative art and abstraction, which he describes as figural. In this category he includes the work of Van Gogh, Cezanne and Bacon. The figural involves predominating sensation over figuration, so in Bacon’s work the viewer’s bodily experience of the scream of the pope in *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X,* predominates over their seeing the pope’s representational image.[22] It involves developing a language to describe experience where painted entities—colours, shapes, forms—more directly evoke experience, acting on the nervous system through pathways which are perhaps more immediate than the interpretation of a scene figuratively. Deleuze describes this direct effect on the body as analogical.

Figure 11, *Conversation*, 2014

One of my early paintings, *Conversation* (Figure 11) began to combine figuration and abstraction in a way that I see conforms to Deleuze’ proposition of the figural. It is a diptych consisting of two figural paintings,

[22]Grosz, 89

one of which is more representational and one of which is more abstract. The ground layer, representing the garage space, is similar in each. Both contain representations of electrical wires and a series of abstract red-brown marks of heartbeats that circulate across both canvases. In the right hand canvas, are three mechanics under a car apparently in conversation. In this panel, the car, hoist, air pressure hose and tyres, although somewhat abstracted, clearly represent the garage. The left hand canvas uses a similar approach to *Rotation I* (Figure 7) and the heartbeat marks, rectangles and hoses rotate. Again I aligned the rafters and horizon line with the bottom of the painting to provide contrast and to suggest a stable vertical and horizontal. I found that this figural diptych conveyed the scene more convincingly than either representation or abstraction alone did. It allowed me to show both visible and invisible aspects of my experience. I will return to a painting based on *Conversation,* later (p.27ff.), but first I want to discuss my palette choice and how it also 'rotated'.

Developing the palette

I wanted to find a point of departure for my colour choices that could in some way follow the rules I was uncovering that related to the work of the garage.

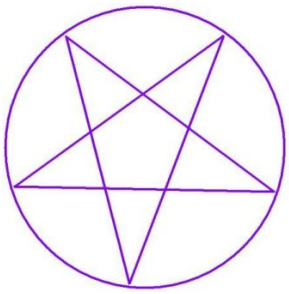

Figure 12, *Arrangement of wheel nuts*, 2017

As the mechanics rotate the wheels on the car, using a power spanner, they remove the wheel nuts, take off the wheel, replace it on another set of bolts, replace and tighten the nuts. Finally, as a check, a second mechanic tightens the nuts with a hand spanner. The operator hand tightens the nuts by each time crossing to one of the two nearly opposite nuts, eventually

returning to the starting point (Figures 12 and 13). In the past, wheel nuts were arranged in a regular pentagon, sometimes heptagon, and on most makes of car this is still the case. The reason is that it is possible to tighten the nuts in a way that is continually nearly opposite so that tightening and retightening occurs uniformly over the hub.

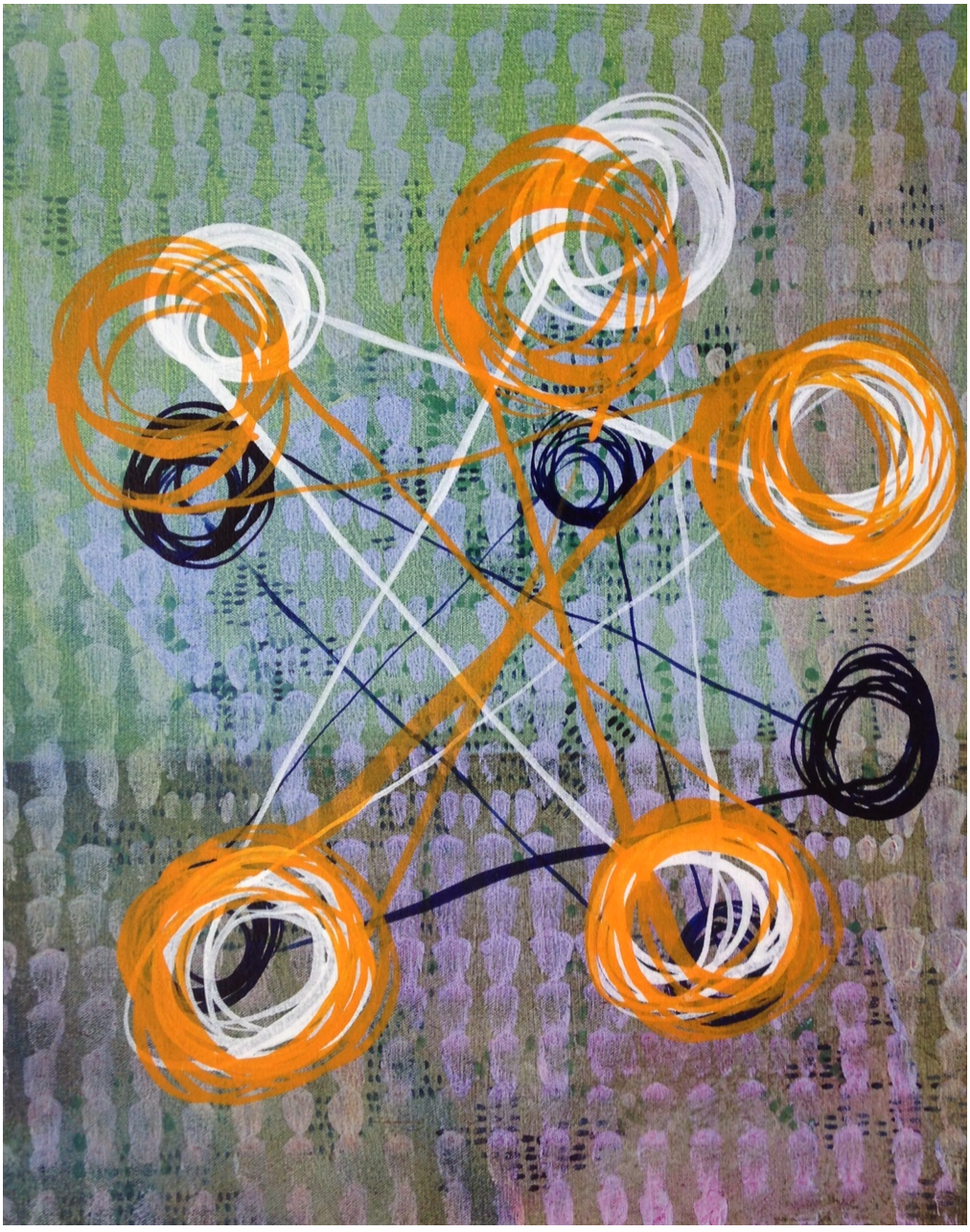

Figure 13, *Cross Tightening 1,* 2015

In response to this observation I made a series of works about the cross tightening of the nuts (Figure 14) and into this I incorporated rhythmical

marks referring to the heartbeats of the mechanics and me. I rotated the canvas as I worked in the four rectangular directions of the grid. The figures in the painting were lines that traced the movement of a point on the power spanner. One represented undoing the nuts, one replacing and one hand tightening. The colours were all derived from the local colour in the garage.

Considering these works led me to develop a palette that would automatically bring dynamic contrast into my work. I understood the work of the garage to exist (metaphorically) in a state of dynamic equilibrium—a state of equilibrium between two or more continuing processes.[23] So, although the garage presents itself as an active place, the processes maintain equilibrium. An example of this is a rotating wheel. It progresses in the direction of its movement but is stable in the perpendicular direction and thus its forward momentum resists its being knocked over. This is what I was attempting to show. Elements of the scene—rotating wheels, moving cars, people working in a preplanned routine—are dynamic but also stable and are in dynamic equilibrium.

Cross Tightening 1 is not successful in itself. The three rhythmical layers, the architecture, the heartbeats and the gestural lines are too disparate. There is nothing to integrate them—neither colour, paint delivery nor shape. But the idea of a continuous, always nearly opposite entity resonated with my ideas about colour contrast. I wanted contrasts that would be exciting and alive but would have an underlying system and harmony. This resonates with Bridget Riley's colour theory in her paintings of the Orpheus series.[24]

---

[23] *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary,* 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), Vol. 1, 779. This concept comes originally from physical chemistry. Dynamic equilibrium is achieved when forward and reverse chemical reactions are happening at the same rate.
[24] Riley, 123.

Figure 14, Bridget Riley, *Song of Orpheus Study*, 1978

Riley is an abstract painter who invented and developed optical art in the 1960s and has since moved on to explore the optical effects of colour. In her essay *Into Colour,* she describes how she deployed colour in her *Orpheus* series (e.g. Figure 14).[25] There is a large range of interactions in this work, arrived at by a relatively simple system. She made the work by arranging the colours in three-colour and two-colour twists generating a profusion of interactions. She arrived at the palette intuitively but when she came to think about how they acted dynamically on each other, she realized that they were five colours that she could arrange in a regular pentagon on the colour wheel (Figure 15).

[25] Riley, 111 – 126.

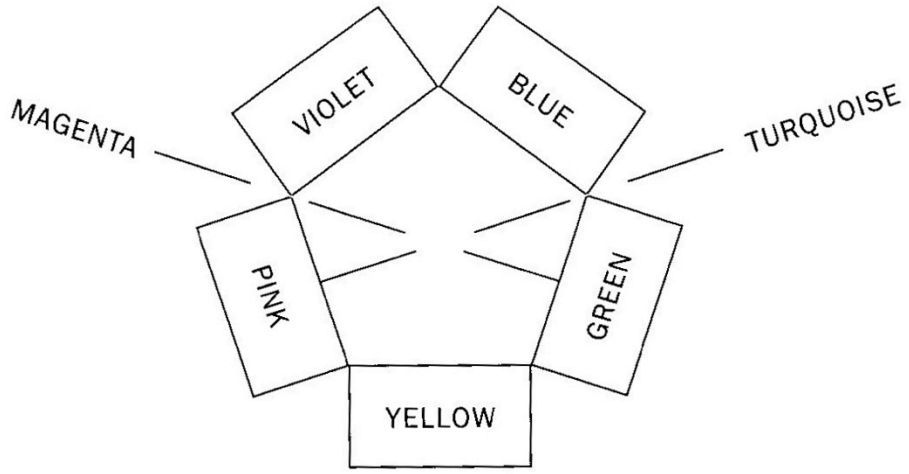

Figure 15, Bridget Riley. Colour Diagram

In Riley's work adjacent colours combine to make fugitive colours as indicated in Figure 15. They are fugitive in the sense that they are made in the eye and mind of the observer, and come and go as the observer's eye moves around the painting. These evanescent colours are complementary to the colour opposite. For instance in some of the twists, the blue and green combine to make fugitive turquoise, which is complementary to the particular pink she is using. The unstable and transient nature of the combinations is what gives the painting its energy.

Reinforcing this phenomenon is the fact that all the colours in Riley's diagram are in simultaneous contrast with each other. Johannes Itten in his theories maintained that a complementary contrast is static whereas a simultaneous contrast is dynamic.[26] Complementary colours such as the pink and turquoise in the diagram are stable when placed together because the physiology of the eye manufactures the true complementary when it views a colour. Simultaneous contrasts such as the pink and the blue are unstable because the eye is trying to change the contrasting colour into its true complementary, turquoise. The colours are trying to change each other and as a result cannot remain stable.

[26] Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color: The Subjective Experience and the Objective rationale of Color,* (New York: Van Nostrand Rheinhold, 1973*) 78*–96.

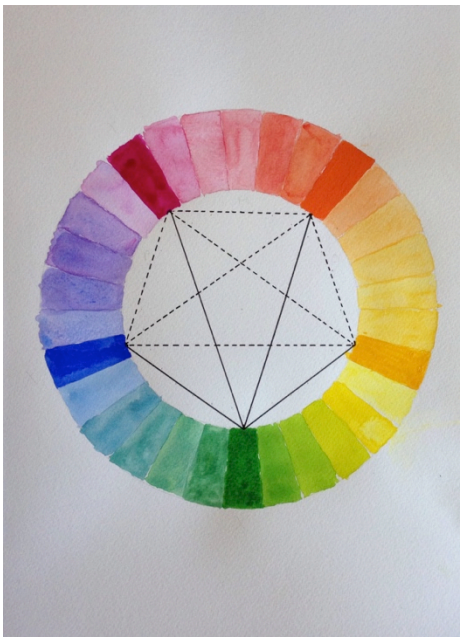

Figure 16, *Dynamic palette,* 2015

Since my painting employs areas of colour rather than stripes and twists, I am not aiming for the same effects as Riley, but I wanted to employ the simultaneous contrasts that she spoke of. Figure 16 shows my development of such a pentad. Each colour is in a relation with the others such that it is in simultaneous contrast with two and is adjacent to two others. There are no true complementaries. I arrived at this particular system because the palette I had chosen for my paintings to date could, with slight modifications, fit into this scheme. I introduced magenta and emphasized the indigo and ultramarine blues rather than the cool blues I had been using.

As with Riley's scheme, each colour is adjacent on the wheel to two others and can combine with them. In this way, each one is in simultaneous contrast with two others. The diagram shows that there is a dynamic stability in the system because as each colour bounces off the next, it eventually comes back to the starting colour. The next step was to introduce this palette into my rotating paintings.

Rotating the ground

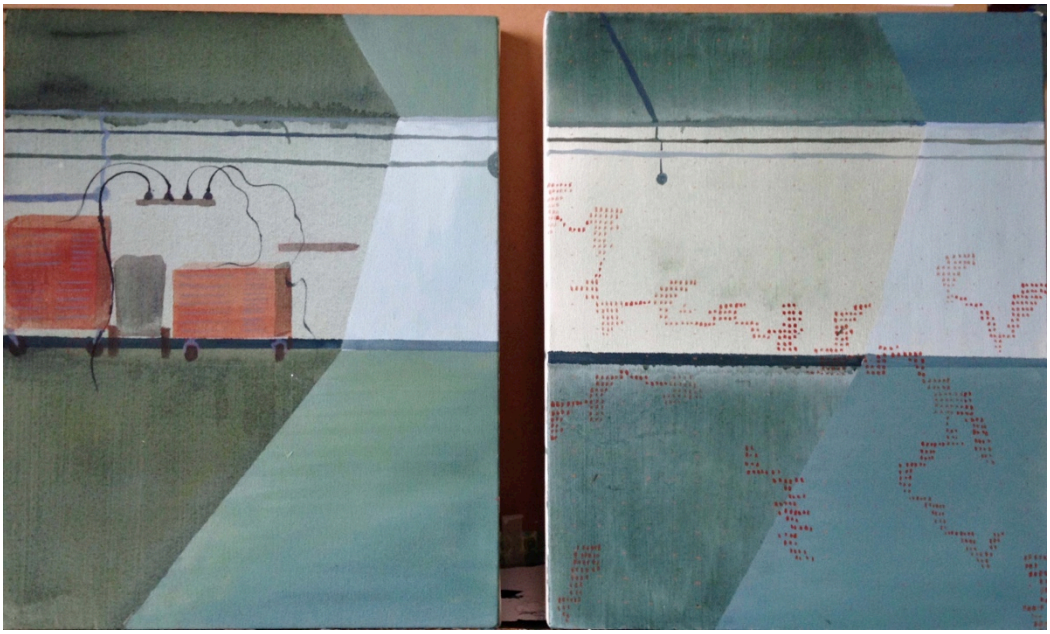

Figure 17, *Conversation,* 2014, work in progress

I used this palette in my next series of paintings. Figure 17 is the ground for *Conversation* (Figure 11). It consists of somewhat abstracted shapes of light and shade to describe the space of the workshop bay. The colour was built up from layers of washes of acrylic paint. I used these shapes in magenta, ultramarine, green, yellow and red-orange, the colours of my new palette, to make Figure 18, the ground for *Air Pressure Hose,* (Figure 19). I rotated the canvas each time I applied a layer.

I used this way of making the ground in nearly all subsequent paintings. The process generates complex colours, a grid and an indication of rotation. I painted lines that referenced the exposed electricity wires in different orientations in the painting, once again to give a feeling of the space rotating.

Figure 18, *Air Pressure Hose 1,* 2015, Work in progress

In completing the painting, I continued to deconstruct the scene using rotation—I added more electricity lines, a car carapace, parts of the hoist and the ramp and added loose painted line depicting car parts. I introduced each element in a different orientation, not necessarily at right angles to the canvas and used, with slight modifications, the colours from my dynamic palette. *Air Pressure Hose 1* (Figure 19) is the resulting painting.

Figure 19, *Air Pressure Hose 1,* 2015

Contrasts

As well as colour contrast, this painting and the ones preceding it contain contrasts in paint delivery. I experimented extensively with different mediums. *Air Pressure Hose I* consists of translucent washes, impasto paint, painted line and opaque thin paint. The car carapace contains mica

and glitters slightly. Including and resolving painting contrasts (e.g. Figure 20) is an important part of how I depict the contrasts in the garage.

Figure 20, *,Grey Ground and Figure (Aaron),* 2016, (detail)

My work shares characteristics with that of Julie Mehretu, the American Ethiopian artist, in that it deals with dichotomies. These are in her case organic/geometric, drawing/painting, fast/slow, intuitive/planned, abstract/figurative and large scale/small scale.[27] Mehretu acknowledges her Marxist/ Hegelian dialectical approach and speaks of its development in later work into producing a third space, which is different from the sum of its parts. I am also aiming for this, especially in the area of abstract/figurative and drawing/painting.

[27] Julie Mehretu, Tate Gallery, "Julie Mehretu", *American Artist Lecture Series,* 2014, http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/audio/american-artist-lecture-series-julie-mehretu (accessed 18 February 2017).

Figure 21, Julie Mehretu, Untitled, 2001

I use many of the same devices as Julie Mehretu do to construct space. The ways that space is generated in the works, by layers of drawing, translucent paint and opaque paint are similar. Mehretu's drawings contain some illusionistic perspective as mine do, with the addition in her work of gestural mark making. The opaque shapes are in more saturated colours than the smaller ones in the underneath layer so they appear to come forward. The large marks loosely appear to share a vanishing point that articulates a space. There are many differences too; in particular, Mehretu's work is enormous and immersive. My work addresses the intimate and the everyday whereas hers is concerned with global politics.

Figure 22, Fernand Léger, *The Mechanic,* 1920

The Mechanic (Figure 22) by Fernand Léger is another painting that has an obvious connection to my work and integrates contrast in a satisfying way. Made in 1920, *The Mechanic* shows a monumental half figure of a man modelled to give depth of form in front of a flattened architectonic background with areas of black, white and flat pure colour. Léger throughout his life held a theory of contrasts and maintained that a painting needed to hold contradictory elements to be effective.[28] This painting has integrated modeled flesh and hard-edged flat geometry in several ways.

[28] John Golding, *Fernand Léger: The Mechanic, Masterpieces in the National Gallery of Canada No. 6* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1976), 3.

The black singlet, although by implication three-dimensional, is of the same flat black as the background. There is a muted yellow in the ground that is also used in the modelling of the flesh. Both the figure and background are abstracted in a geometric way. Similarly in my paintings I am looking for ways to include the contrasts that are a major a part of the scene, whilst at the same time integrating the painting itself.

Considering *Air Pressure Hose 1*, the body of work surrounding it and Mehretu's and Léger's work, I decided that rotating the canvas, using a dynamic palette and contrasts was starting to convey the energy of the scene. But to make the next paintings more compelling I felt that I needed to integrate the layers—the ground and the figure. Revisiting my aim of rendering this particular workplace, the garage, I decided that I might need to modify the palette to reflect local colour. However the key element missing in terms of rendering active bodies in an active scene was the figures of the mechanics. The next chapter addresses this.

Chapter Two: The Figure

Introduction

In this chapter I show how I continued to draw and use painted line and I discuss how I reintroduced figures into the work. I started to use photography in order to see detail in the dark parts of the workshop and to help in my aim of including the figures in motion with convincing detail. I speculate, by drawing parallels with the work of Ken Whisson Georg Baselitz, and Fernand Léger, that the effect of including figures in different orientations is to evoke a sympathetic sense of rotation in the viewer. Then I argue that the figures in my work, like those of Neo Rauch, appear to work on the painting itself. I investigate the implications of this. I discuss absorption in a task with reference to the writing of Michael Fried.[29] Then I address the introduction of multiple figures and the implied relationships between the mechanics. In conclusion I evaluate all of these developments as to whether they are successful in conveying my experience of the garage.

Photographic material

At first I was keen not to use photographically mediated images since my aim was to describe my direct experience of the garage. For this reason for the first year I only used the drawings made on site and memory as source material for my paintings. But in practice I found that taking snaps with my phone was very useful in many ways. On site the contrast of light and dark shadows made seeing things difficult—photographic material extended my vision into the dark recesses of the garage. It froze movement, which let me combine gesture, capturing movement, with the human form in action. It allowed me to break down tasks that the mechanics were performing into sequences that I could follow easily.

In this way the camera extended my physical abilities, memory and vision and became part of the chain of making. For instance, I drew the tyre-

[29] Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 6–72.

balancing machine from where I could see it. Then I photographed it and made a drawing of the photograph to help me remember how it fitted together. Then I used it as a motif in the background of my paintings, both as a two-dimensional shape and then modeled to give the illusion of form. And, on a recent trip to the garage, I was able to get close to a mechanic using the machine and drew him using it. My drawing of the process was informed by my familiarity with the machine and repeated viewing of its use.

The studio drawings from the photographs I took became working drawings for parts of paintings. Photography and drawing from nature complemented each other. Rosalind Krauss describes drawing from a photograph or another drawing as leading to abstraction because the image has ambiguous spaces.[30] Since photography removes information, the artist, working from a photograph invents the absent information, leading to increased abstraction. The opposite happened here. Because I was so familiar with the reality behind the photograph I drew in the gaps from my extensive memory of the action. Photography helped my memory and memory helped me to interpret ambiguity. My experience again found me agreeing with John Berger who says that photography *is* memory.[31] Figure 23, *Reaching Up (Kane),* is one of the many drawings I made using photographic material and which I subsequently used in paintings.

Whole body actions

Throughout the project I have always depicted the whole body even though much else in the scene is fragmented and abstracted. The reason for this is that I am attempting to depict physical muscular energy, which for me starts in the feet and includes every muscle and nerve in the body in some form or other. I initially made this decision unconsciously but on reflection I

[30]Rosalind Krauss*, The Originality of the Avant Garde and other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985), 125.
[31]John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph,* ed. Geoff Dyer (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 100.

considered that it was the only way to evoke whole body actions. For instance even though Marshall (Figure 48) is undoing a nut with his hand and arm, the painting shows him in action from head to toe. Every one of my images could be analysed in this way.

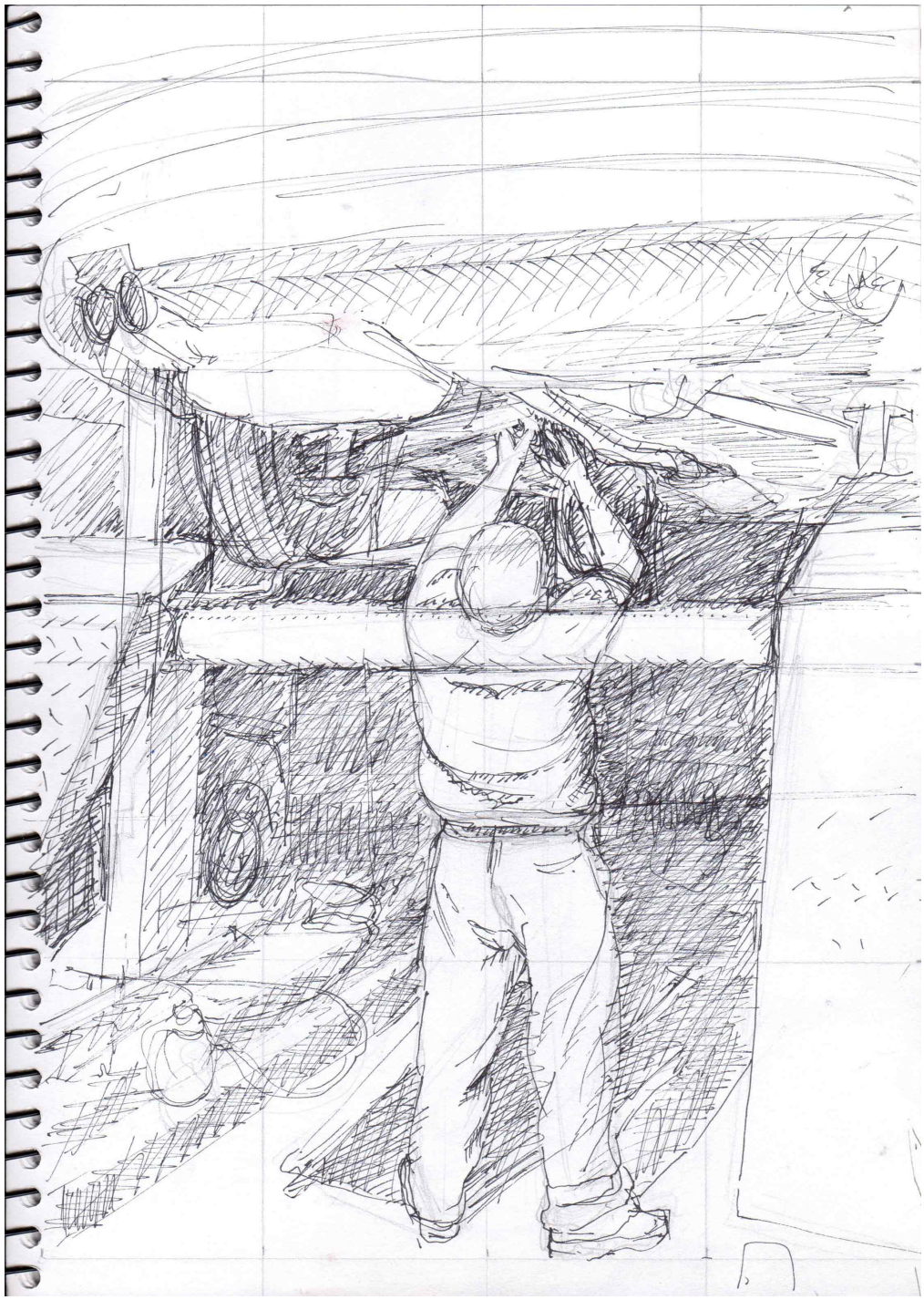

Figure 23*, Reaching Up (Kane)*, 2015

The figure

Orientation

Figure 24, Rotated Ground, Rotated Figure *(Kane)* 2015

At this stage I reintroduced the figure into the works. In this series, exemplified by *Rotated Ground, Rotated figure (Kane),* (Figure 24), I included figures, made by using painted line as the last element in the painting. The figure was derived from the drawing—Figure 23. The ground was similar to that in the *Air Pressure Hose* series—rotated architectural shapes—but with the addition of silhouetted machines. I considered that

the layers still needed to be more satisfactorily integrated and as the series progressed I found ways of doing this.

Figure 25, ***Upended (Kane),*** **2015**

In another work in this series, *Upended (Kane),* (Figure 25*),* made somewhat later, I integrated the layers by altering the order in which I put them down—alternately opaque and translucent. I matched the painted line to the tertiary colours elsewhere in the painting. I delineated the figure partly by painting ground colours around it, and I introduced architectural

elements in a static arrangement to contrast with the rotating parts. The composition, although dispersed, has a focus at the mechanic's hands. This is generated by the vanishing point of the architectural elements and the upside-down orientation of the active mechanic.

In the previous chapter I described how I introduced rotation into the articulation of the space. Since they often work above their heads, the subjective world of the mechanics is upside down. In Figure 25, *Upended (Kane),* there is an implied space in conventional perspective. The rafters, the grey car ramps and the blue-grey transparent pillars of the car hoist operate, together with a consistent vanishing point, to define a static space. A further formal component that embodies up and down is the format of the canvas, a ratio of 5:4: a broad rectangle. It allows for space for rotation but implies a vertical orientation that relates to our standing body. Introducing Kane, the machines and the car body in different orientations contrasts the rotation with the static space.

The figure, the car parts and the car carapace rotate progressively as the eye moves down the canvas. In German neo-expressionist painter Georg Baselitz' painting *Tulpen*, (Figure 26), the motif is treated in the same way.[32] The direction changes progressively from top to bottom of the painting and we get a sense of instability and rotation. The geometric blue and magenta shapes in the ground make the pot appear static, while the diagonal image of the tulips gives a sense of rotation and dynamism.

In *Upended (Kane)* the rotation of the working mechanic resonates with the subtler rotations in the ground. The architectural triangular shapes are put down in the four directions of the canvas. Two silhouetted machines are in arbitrary orientations. A rotated green car carapace is painted over the ramps and hoist. The rafters and ramps act like the spokes of a wheel with radial lines. This is one way that I have achieved my aim of conveying the

[32] *Georg Baselitz,* (Koln: Benedict Taschen, 1990), 134.

activity of the workshop by using instability and rotation contrasted with stability.

Figure 26, Georg Baselitz *Tulpen,* 1981.

The human figures in the series, like the space, the cars and the machines, have been made in different orientations. *Upended (Kane)* and the rest of the series explore how the figure operates when it is seen upside down, sideways or right way up. The figures are all based on naturalistic line

drawings and represent mechanics at work on various tasks. I was keen to see how we perceive these figures, absorbed in work.

The human figure in whatever form it is presented invokes mirror systems in our brain. Ian McGilchrist in his book *The Master and his Emissary* which is an overview of current thinking about brain functioning said that mirror systems are found in many areas of the brain and are involved when we copy actions. One aspect of their functioning means that imagining something, watching someone else doing it and doing it ourselves share important neural foundations.[33] In a literal muscular-skeletal way we take on some of the actions. It is important to note that these mirror systems only relate to the direct viewing of a motor action and a motor response, not necessarily to such things as empathy.[34]

When we look at the figure in *Upended (Kane)* there are several possible bodily interpretations leading to bodily sensations of what is happening. The figure is nearly inverted but not quite and can be read in several ways. It can be experienced as actually upside down and standing on his hands. We can consider that the painting has been hung upside down. We can invert the scene mentally and read the figure as working on the car above his head and consider that we ourselves are in an unusual orientation. We can invoke the rotation in the painting and feel the figure spinning and subject to centrifugal force. This force acting on the figure means that the figure has to hold on to the underside of the car to prevent himself from spinning off the painting. As we consider each of these interpretations in turn, they succeed in some ways and then fail. The alternating bodily interpretations, when it is not possible to settle on one, bring energy to the painting.

[33] McGilchrist, 250.
[34] Robert A Burton, "A Skeptic Considers the Hype over Brain Cells Linked to Complex Behaviour". *Scientific American,* May 31 2013. Burton cautions against the overenthusiastic adoption of the concept of mirror neurones to explain complex human interactions. Relevant motor regions of the brain are activated when a subject views an action but it is speculation that this relates to empathy.

In his painting *Brightening as a White Thread, Kiki's Dream of Prague* from the series, *Mrs. Lenin and the Nightingale,* Georg Baselitz examines the idea of hanging a painting so the figures are inverted (Figure 27). Baselitz has adopted this tactic since 1969 and it has become something of a trademark. In this work the motif is obviously upside down since the figures are sitting on a sofa.[35] The marks indicate that the painting was constructed in several directions. Baselitz has said that his intention in hanging the figures upside down is to drain them of meaning and that the figure would be abstracted by the inversion.[36] I would contest this. If you invert the page and look at the image in the other direction it is true that you read the figures slightly more readily, but the innocent viewer still overwhelmingly sees them as upside down people. We are programmed to do this.

[35] Norman Rosenthal, *George Baselitz, Mrs Lenin and the Nightingale* (London: White Cube, 2009), 64.
The Baselitz paintings are based on a painting by Otto Dix (shown here) of his parents sitting on a sofa.
[36] Georg Baselitz, "Imaginary Interview with P.M.Pickshaus", in *Georg Baselitz,* 29.

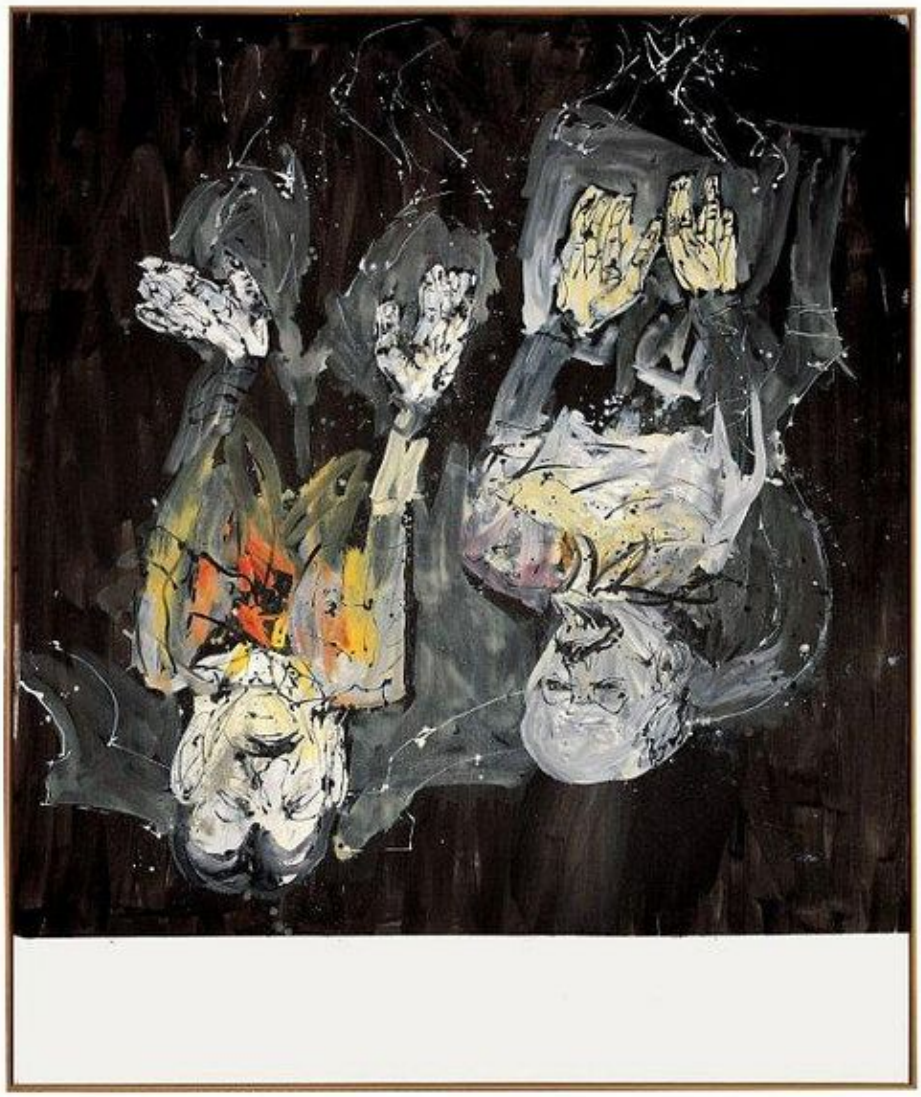

Figure 27, Georg Baselitz, *Brightening as a White Thread, Kiki's Dream of Prague,* from *Mrs Lenin and the Nightingale*, 2008

If we consider the possibility that *Upended (Kane)* has been hung upside down we feel we are correct in that he is performing an action that we know to involve him having his feet on the ground, stretching up to the underside of the car. However, this interpretation is contradicted by the fact that the abstracted car ramps, the blue shape of the hoist and the rafters indicate that the scene is the other way up. In addition, the figure of Kane is not quite vertical, meaning that even if the painting *had* been hung upside-down, the figure is shown as being off-balance.

Figure 28, Fernand Léger, *Les Trapezistes,* 1954

In contrast to the idea of the painting being hung upside down, Fernand Léger's *Les Trapezistes*, (Figure 28) contains naturalistically inverted figures. Léger shows two acrobats in the circus. Identifying with the figures we feel the pressure on the back of our knees from hanging upside down and the blood rushing to our head when we look at it. We feel the stretch in the arm and the pressure on the knee of the other acrobat. The black lines make us feel the rotational swinging movement and the construction of the space shows us how high we are from the ground. When we try to interpret *Upended (Kane)* through this lens we are successful up to a point and feel the weight in the upper torso and the blood rushing to the head, but there is no point of suspension and the arms are in such a position that they could not support the body so once again we have to look for another reading.

Figure 29, Ken Whisson, *A Delicate Balance,* 1984

Ken Whisson in his 1984 painting, *A Delicate Balance,* also depicts a scene from a circus. The figures and the shadows are painted in a loose grid on a white background and each figure is in a different but realistic orientation in relation to their performance. Abstract figures float in abstract space.[37] A yellow figure with black shoes is upside down, an animal-like figure and its possible shadow are at the top of the painting and other figures circulate. The effect of the different orientations of the figures gives a sense of movement and activity even though we are completely clear where the ground plane is—at the bottom of the painting. The figures are inverted, right way up and horizontal and the overall effect is of cartwheeling rotation. The feeling in the body that we are able to bring to bear on the figure of Kane is of the action of centrifugal force. We can imagine Kane holding on to the car underside with his hands and the whole scene to be spinning. Similarly the feeling we mirror is of a stretch in the lower back, relative weightlessness and perhaps dizziness. This interpretation holds up quite well but is not completely consistent with the bend in the arms and the position of the head and neck. And so in a circular way we are back to the

[37] John Mcdonald, *Ken Whisson Paintings: 1947-1999* (Melbourne: Niagara Publishing, 2001), 8.

possibility that either we are, or the painting is, upside down, which is what I originally felt about the actual scene at the garage.

Figure 30, Ken Whisson, *Jean's Farm,* 1972

Ken Whisson's work has helped me resolve another problem that I was dealing with in my project. In *A Delicate Balance,* and *Jean's Farm,* he has integrated painted line by matching the colour of the line to the translucent and opaque colours in the ground, by varying the width of the line, which makes it more obviously painted. The line appears to corral areas of the energetic ground, so making the figures out of the stuff of the ground. Vertical and horizontal lines and edges also denote a 'gridded' up and down that acts as an anchor to the whirling figures. I was keen to try this particular use of painted line in later paintings.

Recursion

Figure 31, *Grey Ground and Figure (Aaron),* 2016

As well as rotating within the painting, the figures in nearly all the paintings in the project share the characteristic that they are portrayed as working on part of the painting. There is a way in which there is a recursion in the painting, the figures are acting on it and mending or making it in some way. In *Upended* (*Kane)* (Figure 25) a man is working on the underside of a car

with a spanner. In *Recording (Michael Writing)* (Figure 33), Michael, a mechanic, is writing on a clipboard. In *Grey Ground and Figure (Aaron)* (Figure 31) a figure appears to be in a tussle with a tyre.

This makes me think of the works of Neo Rauch, the contemporary German painter. In *Waldbahn*, a painting about logging trains, and many other of Rauch's works, the figures are acting to change things within the painting—they are constructing elements of the scene and the painting itself. The four figures apparently nearest to us are performing actions in and on the grey boat-like entity between the green triangular frames. What they are doing is mysterious, reflecting a very complicated reality to do with Rauch's own life and the politics of East Germany before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall.[38] Like Rauch's, my figures are acting on the paintings.

Figure 32, Neo Rauch, *Waldbahn,* 2002

One other thing I share with Neo Rauch is the return to including figuration in painting. I am completely in accord with Rauch when he says "I was more content going home as the father of a figure than the father of a triangle."[39] I have been an abstract painter for some time, but it has given

[38] April Eisman, Painting the East German Experience*, Oxford Art Journal*, 35, 2012, 233-250.
[39] Eisman, 248.

me great pleasure to paint people figuratively. Now I am fortunate that my paintings contain both figures *and* triangles.

Absorption

As I drew, painted and subsequently photographed, I noticed that I rarely saw the faces of the mechanics. Their heads were under the car as they positioned the arms of the hoist or in a dark wheel arch as they tightened a nut or lowered as they recorded jobs. I did not see the faces for the obvious reason that, when working, their eyes were focused on the task of the hands. Even when they were approaching me their heads or eyes were lowered as they followed the movement of a wheel or retrieved a tool. I saw and drew and painted the backs of their heads or a partial profile. Their gaze did not engage with mine.

Seeing the face of a figure leads to a relationship, imagined or otherwise. Painters have painted figures that evoke love, fear, awe, pity and desire where the face is central, the figure faces the viewer and engages with their gaze. By the nature of the real scene at the garage in order to see the faces of the mechanics I would have to *be* the car, the wheel or the spanner. The car and the machines are solid, very present and a necessary element in my work. I find that as I work, I never see the face directly.

This did not concern me unduly because my main goal was rendering the energy of the body. Painting figures from the back or from above seemed to emphasise movement and bodily presence. It took away the distraction of the face and facial expression. It could be said that it objectified them, but I would be more of the view that it enabled them to be perceived in a bodily way by the body of the viewer, mediated by the observer's mirroring. I built up a body of work that contained human figures with obscured faces, as well as abstracted features of the environment.

Figure 33, *Recording, (Michael Writing),* 2015

Considering all the paintings I became aware of an overall sense of absorption, which I decided was one of the subjects of the paintings. People immersed in work are absorbed by it, regardless of the nature of the work, whether they be artists, taxi drivers, builders or accountants. Perceived time changes in its nature, and the work itself changes in quality. The world narrows. Sensory perception changes. Contemplation is at odds with the noises, rhythms and arrhythms of the workplace, but nevertheless I

felt it was the real experience of the men I was observing. Their external and internal realities differed.

Figure 34, *Light and Shadow* (*Cameron and Michael),* 2016

The absorption that I noticed started to be echoed in the formal qualities of the work. As I progressed with integrating the figure into the painting, I used the ground as well as line to delineate the figure (e.g. Figure 34). This meant that some of the ground was lassoed to form the figure and some surrounded and depicted it. This led to a figure that was absorbed in work

in terms of the figurative content of the painting but was also absorbed in the materiality of the paint. The figure was made of the stuff of the garage.

Michael Fried, the art historian, has written extensively on the subject of absorption in painting. He writes about the eighteenth and nineteenth century project of making painting realistic by eliminating theatrical poses and expressions.[40] Artists were attempting to portray human subjects as if they were unaware of the beholder and absorbed in the action of the painting. His analyses of absorption in Gustave Courbet's *The Stone Breakers* 1849 and *An After Dinner at Ornans* (Figures 35 and 36) shed light on what I was observing.

Figure 35. Gustave Courbet, *The Stone Breakers*, 1849

In Courbet's words

> I stopped to consider two men breaking stones on the highway. …… The old man is kneeling, the young man is behind him, standing, bearing energetically a basket of broken rock. Alas in these circumstances one begins like this, one ends the same way. Scattered here and there is their gear a basket, a stretcher, a hoe, a lunch pail etc. All this takes place in the blazing sun at the edge of a highway ditch, … [41]

[40]Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 10.
[41] Fried, 99.

The painting was destroyed in World War II so we only have a photograph and an oil sketch to record it. It was large with the figures being life size.

Like my figures, the faces of the two stonebreakers are obscured. The young man has his back to us and the old man's face is shaded by his hat and obscured by his collar. Both figures are depicted in a very narrow depth of field with the hillside rising steeply behind them; their shadows rising behind them indicate the slope. They seem to enter our space. This effect is even more marked in *An After Dinner at Ornans* where the figure with his back to us, his chair and the dog under it all tumble into our space. Fried argues that we identify in a bodily way with figures close to us, viewed in this way, from the rear. I am keen to use this effect in my paintings to engage the viewer in how it feels to carry out the action depicted.

Figure 36, *An After Dinner at Ornans*, 1848

The figure viewed from the rear has a further effect of inviting us to enter the world of the painting and in the case of these paintings by Courbet, argues Fried, we enter it through the body and eyes of the painter, the

painter-beholder. He argues that the seated figure is Courbet himself, making the painting. As I also discussed in relation to Neo Rauch, the figures in my paintings are constructing the paintings with their tools. In *The Stone Breakers* Fried argues, with examples from previous work, that the left hand figure represents Courbet's left hand holding his palette, and the right hand figure with his mallet represents the brush.

Absorptive painting, according to Fried, can evoke a "protracted and or repetitive temporality".[42] In *The Stone Breakers* there is an implication of the repetitive striking of the stones by the older man's hammer. We imagine duration both of this moment, but also a history of similar work. My paintings, too, with the repetitive nature of the work, include the before and after. The repetitive striking of the hammer also implies rhythm and sound. The tension between silent absorption and environmental noise is something that a silent painting and an imagined sound can address. I return to all these ideas in Chapter Three.

Multiple figures

At this point in the development of my project, I made some works that included multiple figures. The work of car maintenance involves co-operation. Routinely, each car has its indicators and brake lights tested and this needs a second mechanic to check. As I mentioned previously, when the wheels are changed, another mechanic hand tightens the nuts as a check. Sometimes one mechanic is inside the car when it is on the hoist and another observes from underneath as Thea does in Figure 45. Then also, when there is a problem or something needs extra strength, two or three mechanics will work together until the problem is solved. This is what is happening in Figure 37.

[42] ibid. 108

Figure 37, *Behind the Wheel, (Aaron and Chris)* 2016

Seeing the mechanics work together made me think about relationships in this largely male environment. John Berger in his documentary novel, *A Fortunate Man,* written with photographer Jean Moir, describes the life of a country doctor in a very culturally and socially deprived area of rural England in the early 1960s. He speaks of intimacy between men being engendered by working together on a practical problem. He says that if the culture does not reflect their experience, people have far fewer ways of recognizing or describing themselves. A great deal of their experience has to remain unnamed. Berger says

> The easiest- and sometimes the only possible form of conversation is that which describes action: that is to say action as considered as technique or as a procedure…

> Yet there is warmth in such conversation, and friendships can be made and sustained by it, … It is as though the speakers bend over the subject to examine it in precise detail, until, bending over it, their heads touch…
>
> When friends recall another friend who is dead or absent, they recall how he always maintained that a front wheel drive was safer and this now acquires the value of an intimacy.[43]

I find this idea very moving, but I do not entirely subscribe to Berger's way of describing the matter, particularly in relation to the men I am observing. I think that in 2017 we would consider such an analysis patronizing. And also I have very little idea of the actual friendships between the men I observe, at work or elsewhere. But I think that there is truth in it, and the idea of cultures not reflecting the experience of men in these jobs has become topical again in developed countries with the experience of Brexit in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in America. Many analysts have attributed this to the alienation of middle class and working class men from the general culture.[44] Once again I have no idea of the political affiliations of the men I am painting so this is a conjecture. Also I think that the intimacy generated by shared interest in a complicated topic is not confined to men.

With these caveats, the visual imagery in Berger's book made me very keen to draw, photograph and paint the mechanics working together on tasks. What I noticed when more than one figure was involved in the foreground of a painting was that the figures continued to be in a state of absorption. Both individuals were absorbed in the same nut or muffler or valve. This led to interesting compositions, for instance in Figure 37 where Aaron and Mick are examining the back of the wheel hub with a torch. Their awkward stance makes it appear that they share a head. Or perhaps in Berger's words, their heads were figuratively touching. I was very glad to

---

[43] John Berger, *A Fortunate Man* (New York: Random House, 1967), 101.
[44] Mike Carter, "I walked from Liverpool to London. Brexit was no surprise*", The Guardian*, Monday 26 June 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/27/liverpool-london-brexit-leave-eu-referendum (accessed 3 March 2017).

have chosen the workshop for my project because the activity of the bodies in the work they do is fascinating, unselfconscious and often involves athletic and contorted poses.

In this chapter I have demonstrated how I successfully complemented my observation and drawing with photographic material. I brought the figure into an interesting and dynamic relationship with the environment at the garage. In addition, the paintings of multiple figures brought complexity and narrative to the work. However I decided that I needed to tackle two new issues. First I needed to modify the palette to include some reference to local colour because it had strayed too far from what I was seeing. Secondly I realized that I was not meeting my aim of including the body of the artist in the scene. I needed, amongst other things, to introduce more obvious gesture. The next chapter will show how I solved these problems.

Chapter Three: The presence of the artist

Figure 38 ***Untitled as yet,*** **2017**

Introduction

To return to my research question—I am seeking to render the active space of the workshop, the active bodies within it and the presence of the artist. The first two chapters showed how I painted and drew the space and the bodies of the mechanics. This chapter addresses my own bodily presence in the workshop.

Firstly, I demonstrate how introducing deliberate gestural marks conveyed more than just the immediate visual content of the experience—it led to work that included my energy as the artist as well as the vitality and rhythms of the figures and their environment (Figure 38). In addition, gesture, being circular, evoked rotation. In the second section, I describe my curiosity as a woman painting men—how interactions changed the behaviour and actions of the mechanics, leading in turn to alternation between absorption and theatricality. I also show how similarities and differences between the mechanics and me are reflected in the work. Finally I discuss how my day-to-day drawing and observation led me to

consider how the work of the mechanics and their workplace was in a state of flux and the broader political implications of this.

Gesture

Vitality and gesture

Julie Mehretu says, “You read the mark because you feel the mark”.[45] My rationale in including gesture, was that the viewer, seeing a mark with evidence of how it was made, experiences something of the movement themselves. In the early stages of the garage project I had included some marks of gestural abstraction referencing bodily movements and rhythms (for instance, as in, *Hi vis and Heartbeat,* Figure 42*)* and I was now ready to revisit the practice. I scaled up the work for this purpose to medium sized paintings 112 x 90 cm. This was not large, but because I was working horizontally using washes, it was the ideal size for my reach to make free movements. Being medium sized, it also referenced the workshop, being larger than domestic, but smaller than industrial.

Daniel Stern, the developmental psychoanalyst, in his book *Forms of Vitality,* describes an entity which he names “vitality forms” which are composed from the dynamic combination of five elements: movement, force, time, space and intention (or direction).[46] These forms are perceived as a Gestalt and integrated as something that we can sense as aliveness or vitality. Vitality forms are meta-modal; they describe actions, or sensory perceptions. They need content to be apprehended. Stern has drawn up a list of words that are vitality forms, (Table 1), an easier way to understand his point. The words in the list are used in this case as either as adjectives or adverbs and describe all sorts of percepts. They can describe dance, sound, movement, visual stimuli or emotional arousal and many more.

---

[45] Julie Mehretu, *US Art in the 21st Century,* Series 5 Episode 4, SBS aired Saturday August 21st, 2010 http://link.library.deakin.edu.au/portal/US-Art-In-The-21st-Century.-Series-5.-Ep.-4/Q9szdVnld-c/ (accessed 24 July 2017)
[46] Stern, 5.

exploding	surging	accelerating
swelling	bursting	fading
drawn out	disappearing	fleeting
forceful	powerful	weak
cresting	pulsing	tentative
rushing	pulling	pushing
relaxing	languorous	floating
fluttering	effortful	easy
tense	gentle	halting
gliding	swinging	tightly
holding still	loosely	bounding

Table 1 Forms of Vitality[47]

Stern's point is that they all describe a rate of change of something rather than the entity as such and it is this that we perceive as aliveness. We do not perceive movement itself as necessarily denoting vitality, but a rate of change of movement does. This might be a smile that arrives slowly or quickly or an angry gesture that bursts on the scene. Of course a rate of change of movement is necessary but not sufficient to be a vitality form. A car can speed up or slow down but is not vital. Vitality is a characteristic of living things and there are other characteristics such as the ability to reproduce and irritability that a car does not have. Stern further argues that in art, these forms affect emotional arousal so that, for instance, dynamics in music affect the reception of the performance. They can be extremely subtle, so the vitality dynamics can make the difference for the listener between a once-in-a-lifetime emotionally charged performance and something more pedestrian.

What my work takes from Stern's account is that the words used as adjectives or adverbs in the Table 1, as well as describing movement, can also describe gestural marks. Although he does not include the static arts

[47] Stern, 7.

such as painting directly in his argument, I expand it to my use of gesture. Not only will gestural marks energise a work, but also different gestural marks will convey different forms of vitality to the viewer.

Palette and gesture: Teal Car and Cameron

Norman Bryson, the art historian, makes the point in *Looking at the Overlooked* that gesture consists of arcs rather than lines. He states: "Gesture is always a matter of turning".[48] This is an obvious result of the fact that we are made of joints, which hinge or rotate. We naturally make an arc when we move and, in contrast, in order to draw or paint a straight line, we have to adjust direction, angle and pressure as we go along. The fact that whole body, gestural lines will have some reference to a circle serves my purpose admirably (Figure 38). Gestural lines will automatically reference the rotation that I am attempting to evoke.

I went back to *Air Pressure Hose I,* (Figure 19) and I made a group of new works of which *Blue Swoosh (Teal Car)* (Figure 40) is an example. The starting point for this painting was several large blue gestural marks that I would describe as 'surging' reflecting some of the larger movements of the workers. In one of these 'swooshes' based on circular movement, the paint accidentally pooled to give a very pleasing stain; I was happy to incorporate this into the painting, because it referenced various puddles and stains on the floor of the workshop (Figure 39). I then built up the painting using similar elements to *Air Pressure Hose I*. I included rotating geometric shapes, car ramps and drawings of wires, parts of cars, architectural elements and a car carapace.

[48]Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked; Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 72.

Figure 39, *Blue Swoosh (Teal Car),* 2017, work in progress

Figure 40 ***Blue Swoosh (Teal Car),*** **2017**

I also modified the palette that I discussed in Chapter One. I wanted to mute the colours in the ground to reflect local colour somewhat more, so I mixed each colour in the palette with its complementary. Then to bring back the contrast between pure vibrant areas such as cars and hoists, and degraded tertiary colours of the floor and walls, which is so much part of what I observed, I introduced a bright teal colour. I considered that the larger size, the muted ground, the more varied marks, the colour contrast,

and the gesture, made these works much more successful than *Air Pressure Hose 1.*

Figure 41, *Circular Composition (Cameron),* 2017

The next group I painted, for example, *Circular Composition (Cameron)* (Figure 41) included the figure. Once again I started with several large blue whole body ‘swooshes’ and rotating shapes in the ground, using muted colours. I drew the figure in painted line, effectively lassoing an area of ground, so the figure was made from the forces of the workshop. I then introduced more ground layers, this time outside the figure, so it was

delineated in some areas by edge as well as line. Lastly, I modelled the figure three dimensionally with highlights and shadows, still retaining the active ground. I considered this to be a very successful way of painting an absorbed active figure in that it was literally absorbed into the paint of the active ground. The rest of the painting is more or less representational, a car, a shadow, a car on a hoist and a hanging chain.

The sense of rotation in this painting is generated by the circular composition, starting with the tyre, through the figure of Cameron, the shadow, the blue car, the open boot, across the top of the painting with the car on the hoist and back down through the gravity of the hanging chain. Rotation is further evoked by the direction of the implied movement, the figure in the process of slinging the tyre in one movement into the boot. The gesture in the ground also rotates, but being the first mark made it retreats somewhat into the ground. I was happy with the incorporation of gesture, but I wanted to vary it, and increase its presence in the work in keeping with Stern's descriptors.

Rhythm and gesture

In *Courbet's Realism,* Michael Fried argued, with reference to *The Stone Breakers* (Figure 35) that a depiction of a repeated movement, such as a hammer striking a stone, evokes sound.[49] This sets up a contrast between silence and sound in an otherwise silent painting. In this section, I show how I used gesture to bring all kinds of rhythms including repetitive sound into the painting.

[49] Fried, 110.

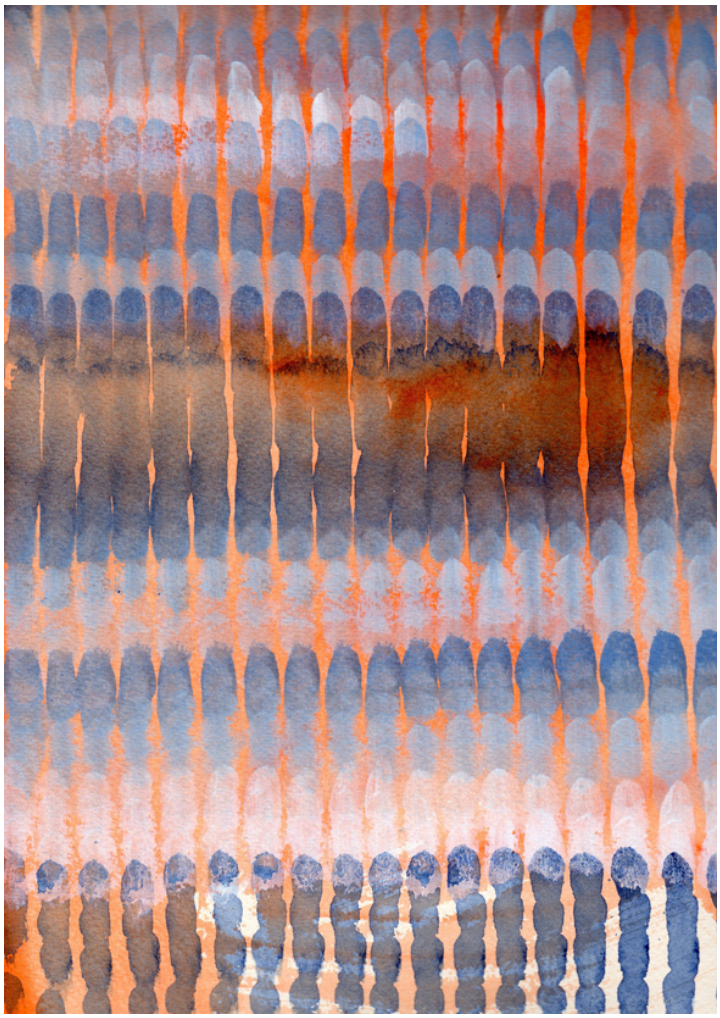

Figure 42, *Hi vis and heartbeat,* 2014

The garage could be seen as multiple interactions of different rhythms. Earlier in the project, I had included rhythmical gesture in the painting as the marks of the pulsating heartbeats of the people in the scene. The experience of being in the workshop was multisensory. The scene itself involved the smell of chemicals and cars, the sounds of power tools, work, voices, birdsong, the radio playing, the physical sensations of heat and cold and the internal sensation of danger. I notated rhythms—the three sharp beeps of the horn as each car was tested, the indicators winking. I made marks to represent low swooshing roaring sounds and high scratchy noises. I drew rhythms that involved sight and sound and sensation such as the sudden repeated application of the brakes as they were tested. My work had previously led me to the view that bodily rhythms give rise to the energy that the body has at its disposal. Bodily rhythms vary. For instance,

heartbeats, breathing and peristalsis (rhythmical movements of the digestive tract) have different frequencies and characteristics. Diurnal rhythms such as hunger and tiredness affect bodily energy. I was conscious of these rhythms in both the mechanics and myself, and from time to time included references to them in the work. For instance *Conversation,* (Figure 11), includes marks made in time to my heartbeat.

Henri Lefebvre in his book *Rhythmanalysis* puts it this way: "Everywhere there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm".[50] He developed a process of analyzing a scene in terms of its ongoing rhythms, and how they interact with the bodily rhythms of the viewer. He describes a Paris street scene viewed from a balcony and it is remarkably like the scene I observed in the garage.[51] In particular he remarks that there is a strict correspondence between what one sees and what one hears.[52] Incorporating rhythms as described by Lefebvre helped me to add directness and immediacy to this everyday scene. Cross-modal transfer, the transfer of perceptions of the world between two or more different sensory modalities, gave me a way of incorporating what I heard into what I presented visually.[53]

This is the aspect of the paintings that I am exploring now, in the final body of work that I will produce in the project. I am incorporating most of the elements that I have described so far: rotation, palette, figuration, abstraction and both circular whole body and rhythmic repetitive gesture. Rhythmical and whole body gesture is becoming more prominent as in *Full Stretch (Braden and Kane)* (Figure 44)

[50] Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis,* 15.
[51] Ibid., Chapter 3, "Seen from the Window".
[52] Ibid., 29.
[53] Allen W. Gottfried, Susan A. Rose, and Wagner H. Bridger, "Cross-Modal Transfer in Human Infants", *Child Development,* 48, no.1 (1977): doi:10.2307/1128889

Installation

Figure 43, *Installation experiment*, 2017

So far I have described how drawing and painting evoked energy. The next stage was to look at how the arrangement of paintings within the exhibition space could further activate the work. I considered the use of shapes other than rectangles in the installation and decided to start with circular canvases. These, I thought, would both refer to wheels and to rotation. Over a period of some time I experimented with hanging works in ways that their grounds related to each other, I matched colours and shapes of the underlying layers across canvases. I painted elements on circular forms to activate and in some cases destabilize the arrangement further (Figure 43). I incorporated small canvases with gestural “quotations” within another arrangement. I considered the height of paintings from the floor in order to place the viewer in a position of looking up at the underside of the car, as they would be in the workshop. An instance of this is the placement of *Flying Orange Car* (Figure 4), high on the wall. Overall this careful orchestration has played a large part in the success of the exhibition in achieving my aim of bringing the workshop into the gallery.

Woman painting men

Unexpected Pleasures

Figure 44, *Full Stretch (Braden and Kane)*, 2017

Figure 45*, Above and Below, (Thea),* 2014

I did not in any way set out to paint men rather than women. However, over the period of time that I spent at the garage I found that I was drawing and painting men almost exclusively. There was one female apprentice, Thea (Figure 45). Thea was studying agricultural science and wanted automotive repair skills to help with her future work. There were interesting issues for her relating to her work one of which was the fact that the tools were all designed for the size and strength of an average man. She therefore had to perform some tasks in a slightly different way from the men. I was interested in her experience and made drawings of her working, but partly because she was only at the workshop for a few months I did not pursue

this line of work. The mechanics I painted during the project were exclusively men.

It was not until somewhat later that I became aware of the enjoyment I was deriving from the work—pleasure in observing men at work on cars in an interesting environment. I was initially drawn to the garage because it afforded me a privileged view of people engaged in whole-body, strenuous, repeated movements. However, other considerations kept me there for three years. Firstly, I enjoyed the things mechanical, the things dirty and oily that I was seeing. Then it engaged with my lifelong belief that work is one of the defining activities of our lives. But what held me more than anything was the pleasure that I derived from watching the relationship of the mechanics to their work and to each other. I was transfixed and absorbed by their absorption.

The pleasure I took from my work at the garage is the pleasure of watching people in an absorbed relationship. I do not want to idealise the scene, but from my conversations with them, I know that these men have had an interest in cars as boys, an interest that drew them to the work in the first place. The work might be repetitive and monotonous to them, but what I see is eyes, minds, hands and bodies in a rhythm adapted to the work they do. I see a physical absorption in the routines where for instance, unthinkingly, Cameron can sling a heavy tyre into a boot with the sort of movement that an athlete such as a discus thrower might take a long time to perfect (Figure 41).

But what might be driving this fascination? It is curiosity, a fundamental human drive.[54] Curiosity leads one out of oneself into a scene. As I draw and watch, I am enjoying the hand-eye coordination, the relationship between the man and his work—his absorption. I draw and photograph this

[54] Rosemary Davies, “Regression, Curiosity and the Discovery of the Object”, *Time and Memory*, ed. R.J. Perelberg, (London: Karnac Books, 2007), 94,95. Freud wrote about curiosity as the epistemophilic instinct: the search for knowledge. Davies says, “He [Freud] assumed a curiosity in us all and intuited its absence as pathological.”

absorption and in the process become totally absorbed in my own drawing and photographing to the extent that it is important that I wear a Hi-vis vest so that I am not run over. It is my imagining being in their shoes that leads to some of my enjoyment. I feel what it might be like to work above my head and have an upside-down view of the world. I imagine inhabiting a strong body. I imagine the feel of things and the smell.

However I am not invisible and I am an unusual presence in any workshop. This is what I postulate is the effect of my being there. The mechanics are aware of my presence, and what that does for them is that they imagine themselves as I am seeing them. This leads to them reimagining their work and gaining a new interest in it as they realize it is being watched. Also they imagine some of things an artist might be seeing about them. This leads to different responses. Some of them strike poses for my benefit. After I told one mechanic, Noel, that I was drawing movement he worked on the underneath of the car that I drew in Figure 44 for thirty minutes using his body in such a way that he was exhausted at the end. He could not possibly work like that all day, but I made a satisfying drawing from it. Most of the mechanics went about their business in what I imagine was a more or less normal way. But I speculate that at some level they were imagining themselves as I saw them. This, however they viewed me, leads to a renewed curiosity about themselves and their work.

Figure 46, *Active scene, (Noel),* 2014

Then I was aware of them seeing me. I imagined myself through their eyes and I attended to my drawing and tried to make sure that some of it at least was comprehensible to them—and that it was a figurative rendering of details of the workshop.

What I am describing is the basis of the well-known Hawthorne effect.[55] Elton Mayo was an Australian sociologist working in Chicago from 1924-

[55] Tim Hindle, *The Economist Guide to Management Ideas and Gurus,* http://www.economist.com/node/12510632 (accessed 13th March 2017), 1–4.

1932 and he performed a series of experiments in Western Electric's Hawthorne factory. The purpose of the experiments was to determine the effects of physical conditions on productivity. However, at the end of the program the experimenter concluded that it was not the physical changes which affected the workers' productivity, but the fact that someone was actually concerned about their workplace and discussed the changes with them before and afterwards. The Hawthorne effect is now acknowledged in all fields and is quite simply the alteration of behaviour by the subjects of a study due to their awareness of being observed.[56]

Over the course of the project, the mechanics and I have joked about how they are artist's models, and I have told them how much I appreciate being able to draw them. I told them how hard it would be for subjects modelling in the studio to perform the movements that they do unselfconsciously. I know they enjoy the attention I give to them and the interest I have in their work. Recently, after I had been discussing my project with two of the mechanics, I drew and photographed them working above their heads together to dislodge a car component that was obviously stuck. I realised that while they were both seriously doing their work, and the problem had to be solved, they were exaggerating their movements for me. I have some wonderful images of this interlude that form the basis of a body of work (Figure 44).

It does not really matter in terms of the paintings I made whether the men were being mechanics or artist's models, but it does matter in relation to the tension between absorption and theatricality that is at the centre of Michael Fried's argument.[57] In my work, sometimes the paintings depict pure absorption as in *Grey Ground and Figure (Aaron)* (Figure 31), but other times as in *Full Stretch* (Figure 44) there is an obvious theatricality that I want to convey. I want the viewer to see the men's consciousness of, and enjoyment in, being watched doing their work. Their consciousness of

[56] *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary,* Fifth Edition*,* Oxford, 2002.
[57] Fried,6ff.

me is another piece of evidence of my presence in the garage, which was an important aim of my research.

Similarity and difference

Figure 47, *Three arms,* 2017

As a woman painting men, my curiosity is fuelled by a sense of similarity and difference. I am observing human beings at work, so my body memory acts as I draw and interpret their movements. But they are men and I am a woman. They are in the prime of their physical fitness, whilst my forces are declining. Figure 47 shows some photographs I took to help with a detail in a painting. I wanted a hand to hold a spanner. Phil holds the spanner as a man would. Elisa, as a woman, holds it with a more flexible wrist. Both holds would effectively undo the nut in question. I put my arm into a position informed by my memory of the scene and Phil's male hold, and so

I had a fascinating body experience of what it might be like to undo a nut in a new way. The painting of Marshall, (Figure 48) in a slightly balletic pose, is based on my imagination of his action combined with photographic evidence of it.

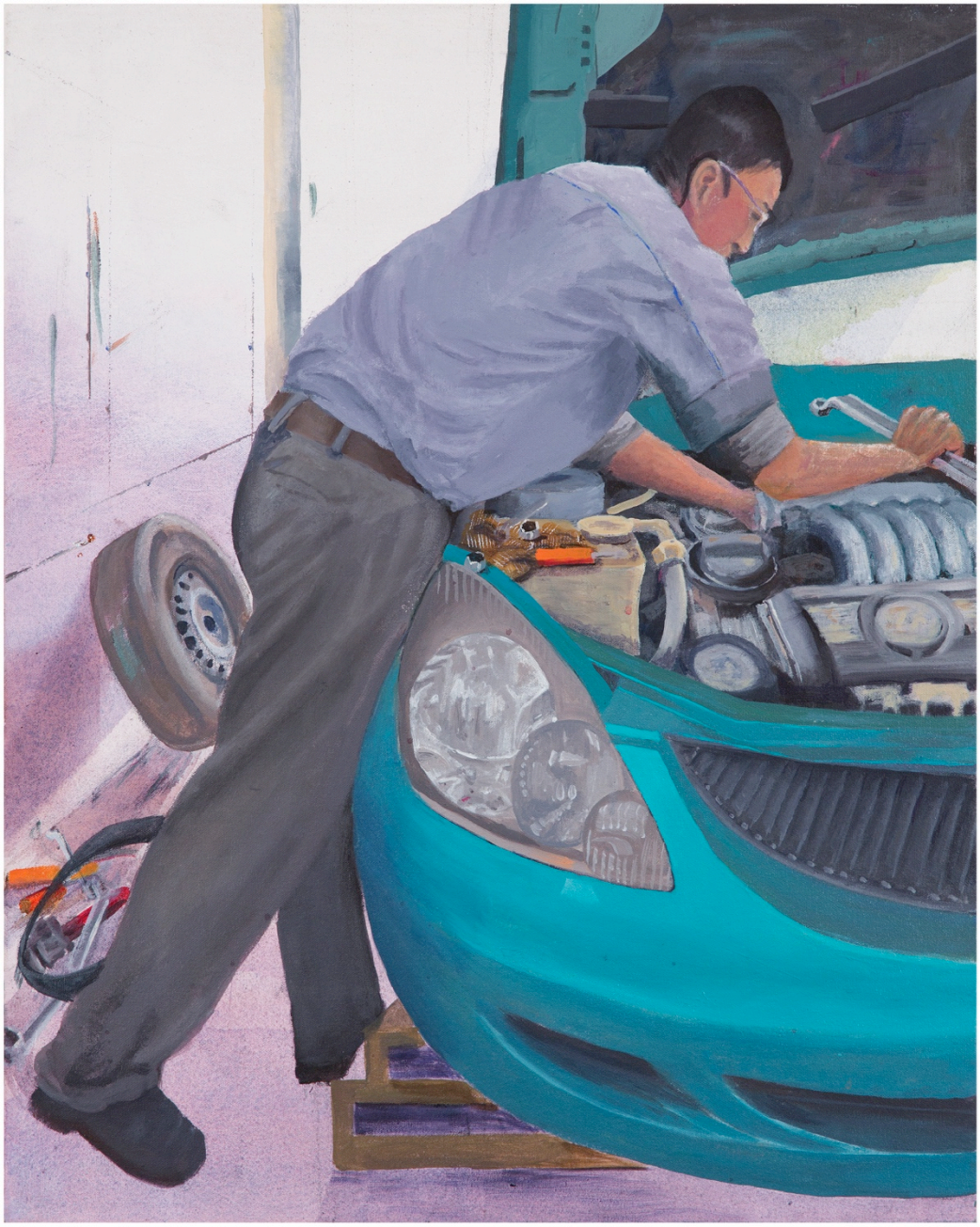

Figure 48, *Purple Light, Blue Car, (Marshall,)* 2017

The history of the depiction of work

The power of figural painting is that the viewer brings their lived experience to both the abstract and figurative aspects of it. Since this scene is a workplace, the viewer brings their experience of work to it. I know that this is true because people, on viewing my work, talk to me about other painters of work, such as Diego Rivera and Léger. What distinguishes my work from the work of such painters is that in mine embedded observation led to the political emerging unintentionally from the everyday, whereas theirs depicted the everyday in order to illustrate the political.

Figure 49, Ekaterina Zernova, *Tomato Paste Factory,* 1929

This painting by Ekaterina Zernova, a Soviet painter, is from the Royal Academy's 2017 exhibition, 'Revolution'. The palette, the use of transparent and opaque colour, and the depiction of human effort in a workplace are strikingly similar to mine. As with my paintings, neither figures nor the workplace are idealised. There is a figure in the top left hand corner of the painting who could be the artist herself—another way of including the presence of the artist in the scene. The work is part of the Soviet Socialist Realist tradition that had the aim of placing work, in particular manual industrial labour, at the centre of building a new society after the Russian Revolution under the leadership of Joseph Stalin.[58] My work evokes works such as Zernova's, and many others made in the twentieth century, quite simply because labour questions were at the centre of politics.

However, Zernova's work and mine have quite opposite political intentions. I obviously do not have access to Zernova's inner thoughts, but at that stage in Soviet history, under Stalin, she was obliged to make art that celebrated work and dignified labour. Painters who did not do that fled the country or did not survive. At that time her work, in general, represented factory workers to celebrate both the workers and Soviet Russia. My work renders the quotidian for its own sake. But I argue with reference to Henri Lefebvre's writing, that the everyday invokes the political as does my work and Zernova's.

Henri Lefebvre writes in Rhythmanalysis:

> in our contemporary mediated society… the gaze and the intellect can still grasp directly some aspects of our reality that are rich in meaning: notably, the everyday and rhythms.[59]

By this, he means that as individuals we can best trust our perceptions in relation to our direct experience of our everyday lives and the way in which they follow predictable rhythms. Other aspects of our lives that we

[58]John Milner, ed., *Revolution: Russian Art 1917-1932,* Chapter 2 "Man and Machine" (London: Royal Academy Publications, 2017), 75–83.
[59] Lefebvre, 15

encounter through the internet, radio and television, are mediated, lose richness and meaning and are less to be trusted.

Some of my drawings and observations of the garage unavoidably made me aware that the workshop was in a state of flux arising from external political changes. Fifteen years ago if I rang the garage, one of the mechanics would answer in one of many different ways and would say perhaps, “Hi, Michael here”. Now when I ring, the person who answers says, “Kmart Tyre and Auto Service. This is Michael, How may I help you?” The formula is unvarying from person to person, workshop to workshop. The workshop is part of a large Australian chain run by Coles and listed on the stock exchange.[60] The mechanics come and go from the workshop as they are deployed across Canberra. There is a procedure for each job. Safety is a major consideration. For instance each time I went to the garage I had to sign a time sheet and wear a safety vest. The mechanics have less independence and professional freedom than previously; for instance, they cannot source parts from wherever they think best. Set against this, they probably have better occupational health and safety and job security.

As my observations continued, I became aware that this workshop was only servicing older models of cars. It is not set up to service some of the electronic aspects of new cars, and it became less busy as time passed. New cars have to be serviced by the dealership of their particular global brand to access their five-year guarantee and the profits are expatriated as part of the global economy. We are seeing a move from the local to the global.

[60]Anonymous. “Who Owns What?” Business Day, *The Age* April 4 2007. http://www.theage.com.au/news/business/who-owns-what/2007/04/03/1175366241223.html accessed 20/4/2017.

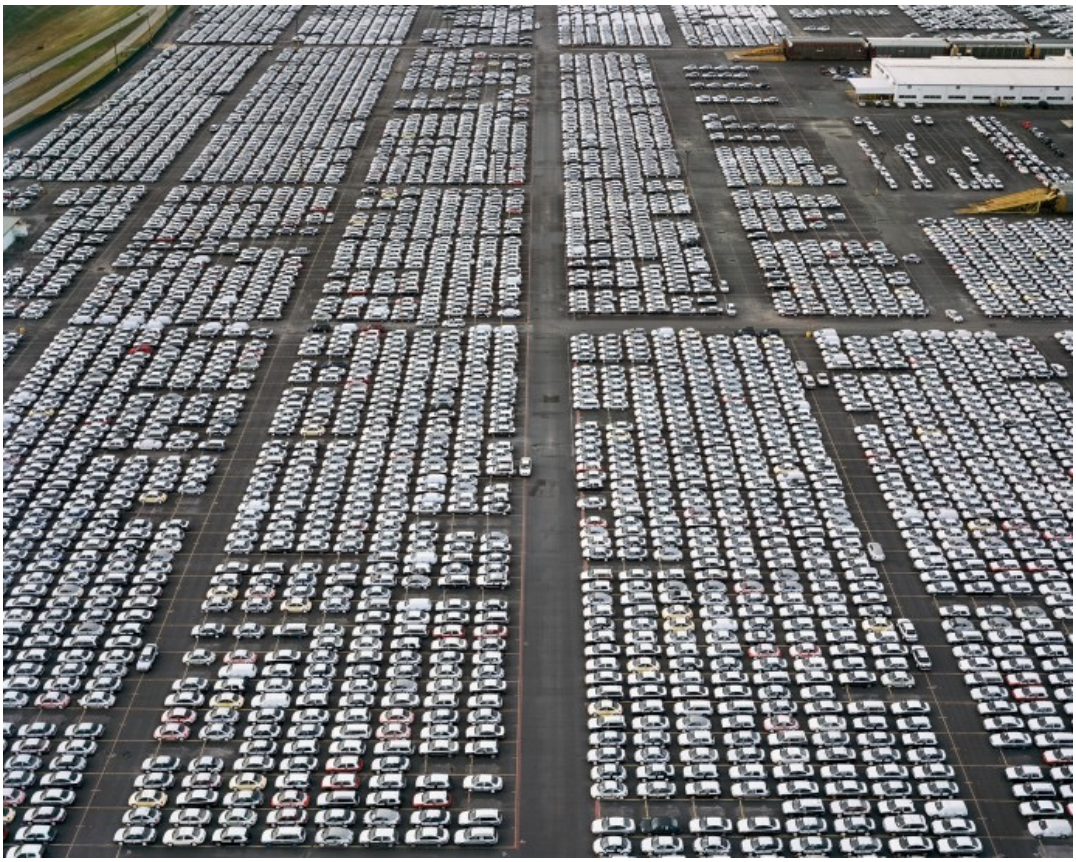

Figure 50 Edward Burtinsky, *VW lot #1,* from Series: Oil, 2004

Figure 50 is an image of VW cars parked after having been manufactured in Texas. The aspect of Burtinsky's work that is relevant to my argument is the scale and global nature of car manufacture and maintenance that, I believe, is spelling the end of the workshop I am visiting. So the scene that I am painting, which I chose simply because it is local and has active people in it, might not be there much longer. The workshops in neighbouring suburbs have closed, leaving only fuel and grocery sales. I

am documenting and celebrating a passing way of working, namely servicing all makes of cars in a local workshop.[61]

This chapter has addressed my bodily, sensing presence in the workshop. I have argued how I conveyed it in the paintings using gesture. I have shown how curiosity and the gender difference animated the paintings. My embedded presence led me to an understanding of political considerations. The reactions of others to the finished work reinforced this understanding.

I have developed ideas about the final body of work in my project. I will include more gesture and a larger number of rhythmical marks in the finished painting. I will be conscious as I work of both absorption and theatricality. I will continue to develop contrasts in my palette, in paint delivery and in mark making. Importantly, I will consider how the works relate to each other with a view to making an active installation of the work in my final exhibition.

[61] Salgado, 6. Photographer Salgado in his book *Workers* has recorded people from everywhere in the world working with their bodies and says:

> This book is a homage to workers, a farewell to a world of manual labour that is slowly disappearing and a tribute to those men and women who still work as they have for centuries.

Conclusion

My lifelong engagement with human vitality was the starting point for this project. Since the idea of a "vital principle" sustaining life has been disproved by the scientific method, little attention has been paid to the idea of vitality.[62] But it is not an idea that will go away easily because it remains as a real human experience, a Gestalt (see Chapter 2). It was this experience I wanted to investigate by practice-led research. Previously I had pursued the expression of human energy through works of gestural abstraction but I wanted to explore other ways of rendering vitality. This led to my research question: "How can I use embedded observation and the language of drawing and painting to render the whole active process, including the embodied presence of the artist?"

During the course of the project I moved in a trial-and-error process towards my goal of rendering the whole scene that included the body of the artist. I let myself be open-minded and receptive about how the work would develop. Practice-led research, fuelled by doubt and uncertainty, was the ideal tool to explore the question, since vitality is a holistic experience, an emergent property, and is not easily subject to reductive analytical reasoning.

Influenced by Barbara Hepworth's hospital drawings, I decided on embedded observation as the best strategy to investigate the question. After exploring other possibilities, I chose the subject of auto mechanics at work. I found it to be a fascinating and rich source of subject material, which held my whole-hearted attention for the three years of the project. I used drawing as described by John Berger to allow me to enter bodily into

---

[62] Nick Lane, *The Vital Question: Why is life the way it is?* (London: Profile Books, 2015), passim.
Proving a negative, such as the nonexistence of the vital principle is not possible. However in Lane's account of the evolution of life, he explains all steps from the principles of physics and chemistry. Similarly neuroscientists such as Antonio Damasio account for the existence of consciousness from physiological processes.

the garage and to collect impressions, experiences and drawings which formed the basis of the work (Chapter One).

One of the discoveries I made in the early experimental phase of the work was that I had to combine abstraction and figuration into a single work in order to convey the multiple experiences of the 'stuff' of the garage. Drawing on the writing of Elisabeth Grosz, I looked at the works of other figural painters to inform my practice. I deliberately included areas of the painting where figuration broke down to allow colour and gesture to be foregrounded. This allowed me to express less easily apprehended features of the scene. Colour and gesture can act on the nervous system in a direct analogical way as I described in Chapter One.

I observed the way rotation was everywhere. Including human figures in orientations other than naturalistic disorientated the viewer and enlivened the painting. Gesture, inevitably being circular, further evoked rotation. As I explained in Chapter 1, after seeing the work of Bridget Riley and reading her essay "On Colour", I developed a dynamic palette consisting of colours, all in simultaneous contrast to each other, to express animation. I used this palette throughout my project modifying it intuitively as I went on, to include such things as local colour.

As the project unfolded, I found that I was both observing, and including dichotomies in the painting. Based on Julie Mehretu's analysis of her work, which she argues is constructed from opposites, I sought out and included all the contrasts I could see and hear in order to produce a "third space", a synthesis.[63] I included bright shiny, primary coloured areas contrasting with tertiary, dirty oily passages. I opposed the human to the mechanical. My presence as a woman contrasted with the largely male environment. The nature of the space led to strong tonal contrasts reflecting indoor/outdoor.

[63] Mehretu, *US Art in the 21st Century.*

Letting myself be open to the flow of the project, I discovered repeatedly that painting people working showed them in a state of absorption. I painted this idea figuratively, showing the men absorbed in work, but I also evoked it formally, using the absorption of the figure in the ground. My presence as an observer, and particularly as a woman painting men, also led to an alternation between the mechanics being absorbed in the task and performing for my benefit. Throughout the project I read Michael Fried's work on the opposition of theatricality and absorption in painting, especially in relation to the painting of Gustave Courbet.[64] This allowed me to see that the sense of absorption slows and quietens the painting and depicts a different, quieter vitality. Vitality is not always exuberant or effervescent.

Complication played its part in animating the work. Another form of absorption showed the men working on the representational content of the painting, fixing the cars, fixing the painting. This intriguing recursion, paralleled in the paintings of Neo Rauch, and not necessarily consciously perceived by the viewer, enlivened the work. Introducing multiple figures, and inevitably an implied relationship between them, allows the viewer to derive energy from speculating about what is happening between the mechanics.

I found that in solving the problems of depicting the space and the figures, I lost sight of including myself in the painting. Solving those problems led to paintings that were planned and had lost the unpredictability that I valued for its role in reflecting the underlying disorder of the world. At this stage I reintroduced gesture, which had largely left the work. Large gestural marks implied my presence, simply as marks evoke the presence of the maker but they also evoked the large body movements of the mechanics. Rhythmical gesture expressed the rhythms that I experienced in the garage. Marks made in response to other sensory modalities expressed things about the

[64] Fried, 6 ff, then throughout.

scene that were not obvious from the representational content, such as the noise of the brakes being applied. Gesture successfully evoked energy.

I extended the ideas that I had applied within the paintings to evoke the active scene, and applied them to the planned installation of the works in the exhibition space. The works viewed as a whole, with some added elements, should combine to produce an active immersive environment that further will meet the aims of the research.

Embedded observation in a local, everyday workplace led me to ideas about what was happening to car repair work on a larger scale including the national and global. Bruno Latour, whose work on embedded observation I mentioned in the Introduction describes how his approach can elucidate connections between the local and the global.[65] Extended observation allowed me to see this in a way that a shorter exposure would not have done.

Drawing, painting and embedded observation provided the tools to achieve my aim of rendering an active workplace that included my presence. I have discovered for myself, by the process of making, that combining the many aspects of abstraction and figuration in paintings can result in a combination more powerful than either alone. I have shown that in this particular environment, the automotive workshop, drawing and painting based on extended embedded observation has had a particular capacity to evoke embodied human activity in complex environments beyond the simple recording or illustrating of bodies in space. Therefore, I argue, drawing and painting still have an important contribution to make to the depiction of everyday workplaces. This means that my work can take its place along with documentary photography and film in telling the local story of work in the twenty first century.

[65] Latour, quoted by Czarniawska, 1555.

Bibliography

Works Cited

Anonymous. “Who Owns What?” Business Day, *The Age* April 4 2007. http://www.theage.com.au/news/business/who-owns-what/2007/04/03/1175366241223.html accessed 20/4/2017.

Baselitz, Georg. “Imaginary interview with P.M.Pickshaus.” quoted in *Georg Baselitz.* Koln: Benedict Taschen, 1990, 29–30

Berger, John. *A Fortunate Man.* New York: Random House, 1967.

Berger, John. *Berger on Drawing,* edited by Jim Savage. Cork: Occasional Press, 2005.

Berger, John. *Understanding a Photograph,* edited by Geoff Dyer. London: Penguin Books, 2013.

Bryson, Norman. *Looking at the Overlooked; Four Essays on Still Life Painting.* London: Reaktion Books, 1990.

Burton, Robert A. “A Skeptic Considers the Hype over Brain cells Linked to Complex Behaviour.” *Scientific American,* 31 May 2013.

Carter, Mike. “I walked from Liverpool to London. Brexit was no surprise.” *The Guardian*, Monday 26 June 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/27/liverpool-london-brexit-leave-eu-referendum accessed 03/03/2017.

Czarniavaska, Barbara. “Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Social; An Introduction to Actor Network Theory”. *Organization Studies*, London: Sage Publications, 2006.

Davies, Rosemary. “Regression, curiosity and the discovery of the object.” In *Time and Memory*, edited by R.J. Perelberg. London: Karnac Books, 2007.

Eisman, April. “Painting the East German Experience.” *Oxford Art Journal,* 35, 9(2004): 233–250.

Fried, Michael. *Courbet’s Realism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Golding, John. *Fernand Léger: The Mechanic,* Masterpieces in the National Gallery of Canada No. 6. Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1976.

Gottfried, Allen W., Susan A. Rose Susan A and Wagner H. Bridger. "Cross-Modal Transfer in Human Infants", *Child Development,* 48, no.1 (1977): doi:10.2307/1128889.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

Groves Dictionary of Art, oxfordartonline.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/subscriber/article/grove/art/T2086907?q=genre+painting&search (accessed 15/ 07/2015).

Hepburn, Nathaniel. *Barabara Hepworth, The Hospital Drawings.* London: Tate Publishing, 2012.

Hindle, Tim. *The Economist Guide to Management Ideas and Gurus.* http://www.economist.com/node/12510632 (accessed 13 March 2017).

Itten, Johannes. *The Art of Color: The Subjective Experience and Objective Rationale of Color.* New York: Van Nostrand Rheinhold, 1973.

Keats, John. *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats, Cambridge Edition*. (Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1899), (Amazon Kindle Ed).

Krauss*,* Rosalind. *The Originality of the Avant Garde and other Modernist Myths.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985.

Lane, Nick. *The Vital Question: Why is Life the Way It Is?* London: Profile Books, 2016.

Lefebvre, Henri. *Rhythmanalysis, Space,Time and Everyday Life,* 1992, trans. Gerald Moore. London: Bloomsbury, 2004.

Maloon, Terence. "Provocative Invitation to Solve Parr's Riddles." *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 June 1985.

Mcdonald, John. *Ken Whisson Paintings: 1947-1999.* Melbourne: Niagara Publishing, 2001.

McGilchrist, Ian. The Master and his Emissary: the divided brain and the making of the Western World. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Mehretu, Julie. *US Art in the 21st Century,* Series 5 Episode 4. SBS aired Saturday August 21st, 2010 http://link.library.deakin.edu.au/portal/US-Art-In-The-21st-Century.-Series-5.-Ep.-4/Q9szdVnld-c/ (accessed 24 July 2017).

Milner, John, ed. *Revolution; Russian Art 1917–1932.* London: Royal Academy Publications, 2017.

Riley, Bridget. *The Eye's Mind. Collected Writings 1965 – 2009,* edited by Robert Kudielka. London: Ridinghouse, 2009.

Rosenthal, Norman. *Georg Baselitz: Mrs Lenin and the Nightingale.* London: White Cube, 2009.

Salgado, Sebastiao. *Sebastião Salgado – Workers.* New York: Aperture Foundation, 1993.

Speck, Catherine. "Wendy Sharpe: Official war artist in East Timor" *Artlink,* 33, No. 3, 2013:

Stephens, Chris. "From Constructivism to Reconstruction" edited by David Thistlewood, in *Barbara Hepworth Reconsidered.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996.

Stern, Daniel N. *Forms of Vitality: Exploring Dynamic Experience in the Arts, Psychotherapy, and Development.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Whitman, Walt. *Selections from Leaves of Grass.* New York: Avenel Books, 1961.

Latour, Bruno, quoted by Barbara Czarniawska, "Book Review: Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory." *Organization Studies* 27, no. 10 (2006): 1553–557. doi:10.1177/0170840606071164.

Additional Reading

Austen, Kat. "Get the Picture? Art in the Brain of the Beholder." *New Scientist,* issue 2873 (2012), 25 – 26.

Best, Susan. *Visualizing Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-Garde.* New York: I.B. Tauris and co. 2011.

Butler, Cornelia, Catherine de Zegher, eds. *On Line.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010.

Damasio, Antonio R. *Looking For Spinoza : Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain.* Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, 2003.

Drew, Stewart, Jane Won, and Paul Moorhouse. *Bridget Riley: the curve paintings 1961 - 2014*. London: Ridinghouse, 2015.

Eagleman, David, *The Secret Lives of the Brain.* Amazon Kindle Ed, Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2011. Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd. 2011.

Green, Christopher. *Fernand Leger.* New York: MOMA, 1976

Hepworth, Barbara. *A Pictorial Autobiography.* Bradford on Avon; Moonraker Press, 1970.

Hoptman, Laura J. *Drawing Now, Eight Propositions.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002.

Ken Whisson. Paintings 1957-1985. , Broken Hill: Broken Hill City Art Gallery, not dated.

Key, J.A. “Sulfonamides in the Treatment of Chronic Osteomyelitis.” *J Bone Surgery of America.* 1994:26, 63–70.

Koerner, Joseph Leo, and Caspar David Friedrich. *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*. London: Reaktion Books, 1995.

Krauss, Rosalind. “Notes on the Index, Seventies Art in America.” Part 2, *October,* Vol 4, (1997), 58 – 67.

La Rosa, Nick. “Brain Coral, Mike Parr in Conversation with Susan Gibb.” Nick la Rosa http://fbiradio.com/review-art-month-mike-parr/ accessed 3 March 2017

Lodder, Christina, *Russian Constructivism.* Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 1963.

Martin, Colin. “Surgery Sanctified.” *The Lancet.* Vol. 380. Issue 9855, (2012) 1729.

Mercer, Kobena, ed. *Discrepant Abstraction.* Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006.

Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema.” *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory readings.* Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999: 833-44.

Papastergiadis, N. “Everything that surrounds.” *Every day, Catalogue of the 11th Biennale of Sydney.* Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, 1998

Taussig, Michael T. *I swear I saw this: drawings in fieldwork notebooks, namely my own*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Twombly, Cy, Nicholas Serota, Nicholas Cullinan, Tacita Dean, and Richard Shiff. *Cy Twombly: cycles and seasons*. London: Tate Publishing, 2008.

Watkins, J, “Every Day.” *Every day, Catalogue of the 11th Biennale of Sydney.* Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, 1998

Whisson, Ken. *Ken Whisson, Paintings 1947–1999*. Melbourne: Niagara Publishing, 2001

Wolf, Norbert. *Giotto.* Cologne: Taschen, 2006.

Appendix I

Examples of Experimental Work 2014 – 2015